
ヴぁんぷ！II
Vamp
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ヴぁんぷ！Ⅱ

祭りに現れた『食鬼人（イーター）』の目的とは――。

【久方ぶりだね！　親愛なる日本の紳士淑女諸君！　相も変わらず読書に精を出しているかね？　真にその書が好きならば、回読よりも購読をお勧めする！】

【失敬。生臭い話はやめ、今回は諸君に島の祭りを紹介するとしよう！】

【我が島が誇る芸術家、カルナルド・シュトラスブルクを讃えるカーニバルだ！　恋人達の誓いから家族の団欒、過去の精算に未来への希望など――様々な想いと共に、様々な客人が島を訪れる！　喜ぶべき来訪者から、望まれざる者までね。だから諸君も、この祭りを十二分に楽しんでくれたまえ！】

【遙か西の水面に日が沈むまでは、君達人間の時間なのだから……】

What are the goals of the Eaters who have come to the festival?

[It has been a long time, my dear friends! Still avid readers of literature, I presume? If you are a true book-lover, I humbly suggest that you properly purchase your books instead of borrowing them.]

[Ah, my apologies. Let us set aside matters of the material world—instead, allow me to introduce to you an annual festival that takes place on this island.]

[It is a carnival held in honor of Growerth's proudest son, the artist Carnald Strassburg! Once every year the island receives visitors of all sorts for the festivities, each with their own distinctive hopes. From the vows of lovers to wishes for peace in the family, to the clearing of one's past and one's dreams for the future. Guests welcome and unbidden alike participate in this festival, so I ask that you also enjoy it a hundred and twenty percent!]

[After all, the world belongs to humans like you—at least until the sun sinks into the distant horizon in the west.]



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【なんと皮肉な話だろう。そんなフェレットの事を、もっとも吸血鬼らしい吸血鬼と認識し、吸血鬼に対する敬意を持って接しているのが――人間を超えた力を何も持たない、あのミヒャエルという少年だとは。だが、彼が娘にとって救いになってくれる事を、私は常に祈っているよ】

【あのミヒャエルという少年には期待している……いや、いつも驚かされていると言った方がいいだろうか。確かに彼は、人間を超える力は何も持たない。だが――人間が持ち得る力を、彼は最大限に利用する。そして、時にそれは吸血鬼達の力をも凌駕し、魅了するのだ。同じ人間相手には、時にまったく無反応な力なのだが――我々『異形』相手には、絶大な効果を発揮する】

【我が娘は気付いているのだろうか？　いや、気付いていなくとも――いずれは気付いて欲しいと思う。彼のその力を一番認めようとしていないフェレットこそが、彼の力に一番強く囚われているのだという事に】

【俗に『魅力』と呼ばれる、その力にね】

【人は時に、伝説を紡ぐ】

【歴史という事実あるいは捏造の中に、新たな感情や夢を継ぎ足して、様々な伝説を作りあげていったわけだ】

【我々吸血鬼も――本来ならば、その伝説の一つだったのだろう。だが、我々は確実に、この世界に存在する。伝説はやがて、現実の我々のいい隠れ蓑となった。その反面、人間の伝説にある吸血鬼らしく振る舞うことにこだわる者達も現れた。本末転倒な話だが……我が娘のフェレットも、その一人だ】

【だが……フェレットは、外面的には吸血鬼らしく振る舞おうとしているが、実のところ、人間の血を吸った経験は無い筈だ。……内面的には、恐れているのかもしれない。人の血を糧とし、完全に人間と隔たりを作ってしまうという事を。……私は、血を吸う事で人間と隔たりを感じる必要はないと思うのだがね。多くの者はそう思わぬらしい】

[Humans, at times, beget legends.]

[I speak of the fact that they incorporate emotions, dreams, and romance to the fact(or fabrication) known as history in order to create all sorts of mythologies.]

[In one sense, we vampires are also one among such legends. But we do indeed exist in this world, and those legends have become excellent masks for cloaking our presence. At the same time, there emerged some who have begun to obsess over the characteristics of vampires from human myth.]

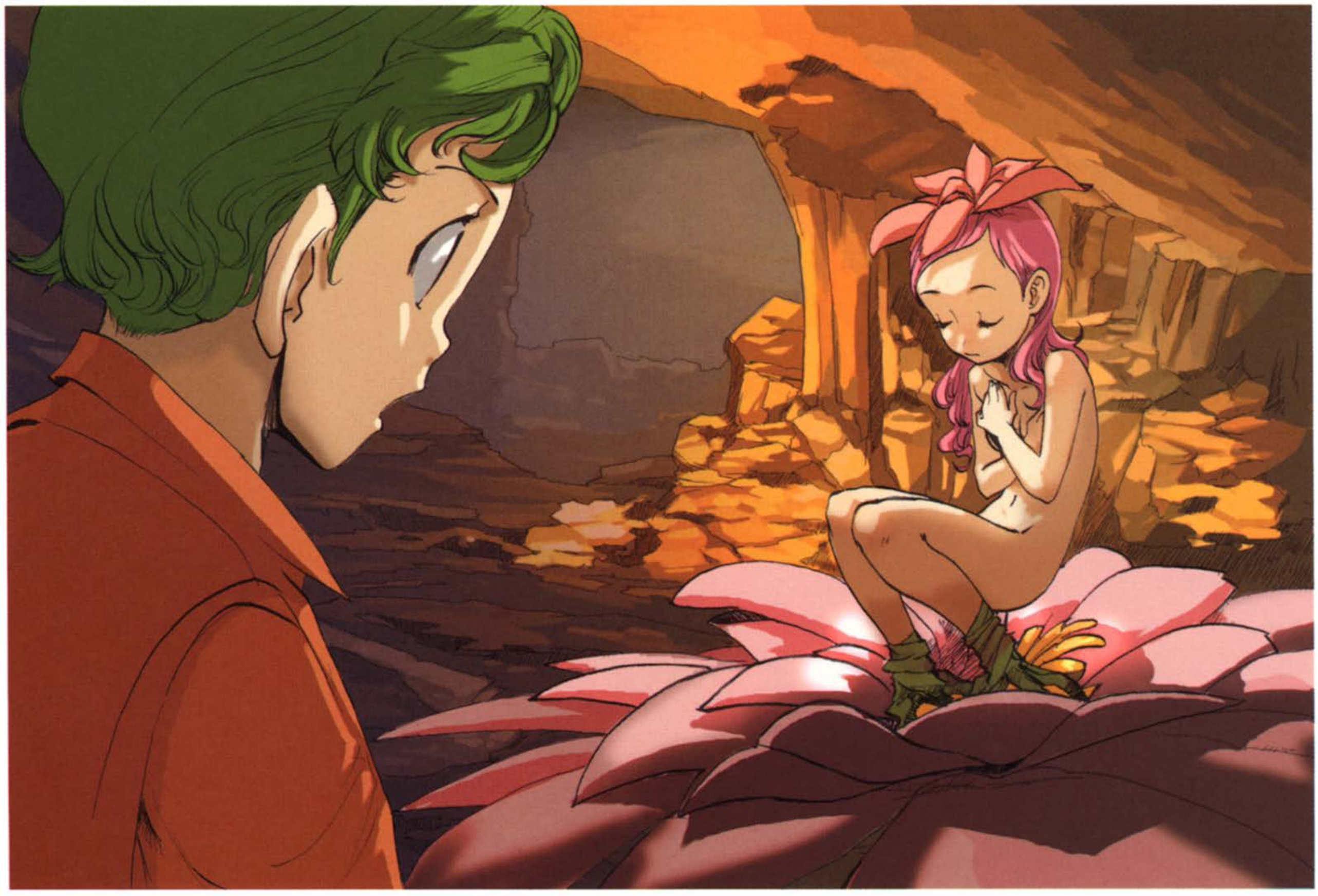
[However… though my daughter may attempt to behave much like a mythical vampire, I can guarantee you that she has never once sucked the blood of a human. …Perhaps she is afraid, deep down, that the act of drinking blood will exile her from humanity permanently. I personally do not feel this way, but there are still many vampires who would agree with her line of thinking.]

[Is it not most unfortunate for this line of thought, then, that the one who treats Ferret with reverence befitting a vampire among vampires is a young man named Michael, who possesses no superhuman power to speak of? Of course, I constantly pray that he will one day be able to save my daughter from her uncertainty.]

[I expect great things of Michael… Or, rather… I suppose it would be most apt to say that I am constantly astounded by that young man. Though he is little more than an ordinary human being, he is the kind of young man who is capable of exerting the potential of humanity to its fullest. Sometimes, that power of his even surpasses the abilities of us vampires, drawing us towards him. Although this magnetic ability of his has little effect on humans, it is a potent skill against us supernatural creatures.]

[Has my daughter realized yet, I wonder? Even if she has yet to do so, I hope that someday, she will come to see the truth—that despite her unparalleled misgivings about his abilities, she is also unparalleled in her gravitation to him.]

[This power of Michael’s, more commonly known as ‘charm’.]



[Though we are called vampires, not all of us take human form. There are some with the appearances of cats or dogs, or even forms that cannot be processed by the human mind. It is merely that those with humanlike features are much easier to become the subjects of human curiosity. Those who have no form, on the other hand, are often taken to be demons or paranormal creatures, or are worshipped as gods.]

[Now, allow me to introduce to you a pair of unusual vampires that have metamorphosed from plants. I consider them both dearest members of my family, and both reside within my castle.]

[One is called Valdred Ivanhoe. Having originally been a watermelon, I am not entirely sure which pronoun to use, or if I should call this friend a child or an elder. Valdred is still quite young, but the watermelon's mind and memories are still deeply etched into that soul. Valdred's soul, you see, conforms to those memories to project the forms of men, women, children, elders, or even non-sentient objects onto the eyes of other creatures. Yes. This former watermelon, following those memories, chose to take human shape in the hopes of an easier life.]

[Even if those memories had been *administered*, not acquired.]

[The other is Miss Selim Vergès, who metamorphosed from a beautiful, determined flower growing in the streets. She bears the form of a lovely young lady, but at the same time she has the almost *symbolic* form of a plant. Some humans called her 'malformed', but how can this be, when her form bears the perfect features of both humans *and* plants?]

[The greatest similarity between those two vampires is the fact that, after their incredible metamorphoses, they chose to live alongside us. Despite knowing that they were, in a sense, outcasts from the worlds of humans and plants.]

[Have they evolved from planthood, or are they merely freak mutations? Or perhaps they have regressed in defiance of nature? That, my friends, up to you to decide.]

[After all, the labels of 'evolution' and 'regression' are ultimately little but the subjective judgements of a third party.]



[Though this island of Growerth bears a deep and rich history, I cannot say the same for its history of contact with the mainland. In other words, Growerth has had very little influence on the history of the world, at least outwardly speaking. That is, of course, partly due to the fact that my predecessor and I both did everything in our power to keep this island out of the spotlight, so to speak.]

[But there was one exception in particular.]

[His name was Carnald Strassburg.]

[The only person from this island who left his mark on the outside world.]

[Serving under my predecessor, he was at once an artist, a tactician, a loyal retainer and a traitor, a musician and a warrior, and an inventor and a destroyer. Truly an entertainer of many faces.]

[...However, I have also personally borne witness to a face of his that he would never show to the human world.]

[This man was simultaneously an Eater, a first-rate Hunter, and also... a collector of vampires.]

[Just as the term implies, he created a collection of vampires. On occasion, instead of eating a vampire, he would bring them to this island as food for his art—or, as others might call it, as his inspiration. He made great efforts to bring harmony to the relationships between humans and vampires, perhaps in order to strike a balance with his actions as a Hunter and Eater. In any event, not even I had the chance to look upon each and every one of his faces. Only my predecessor could tell you much more.]

[Very few on this island remember this man for his hidden talents, but his face as an artist is nonetheless enough for them to celebrate as a symbol of their own history. That is why we are once more hosting this marvelous festival in his honor.]

[But his hidden accomplishments are things to be proud of in their own right. Without him, this peaceful coexistence of humans and vampires could not have been possible.]

[And naturally, without such a man we could never have Eaters or a petty half-man half-vampire so freely roaming the island as they do today.]



[Now, allow me to finally discuss the main subject of my musings.]

[The tale I wish to convey to you today, my dear friends, is the story of a certain Eater's quest for vengeance.]

[It is a lengthy time by human standards, yet only the blink of an eye for beings such as myself. The flames of that Eater's outrage conglomerated and compressed itself to the utmost limits of possibility within his heart. At first these flames were minuscule—so frail that they might have been extinguished with ease by the storm of terror created by his nemesis. But in time, his fire was granted the fuel of power. And soon it grew out of control, as though it might destroy the world entirely—burning completely unrelated vampires within the flames in his heart.]

[It is often said that vengeance only gives birth to yet more vengeance. Even nemeses have family and friends, who will eventually look upon you as their own nemesis. …Although it seems to me that this particular Eater cares not for such things.]

[Vengeance, after all, is only a natural *reaction* to tragedy, intended to bring closure to the avenger's heart. Claims such as 'the dead will not be happy with vengeance' or 'vengeance only begets violence' will do nothing to stop a man's quest for revenge. Such words are not sufficient justification to convince him otherwise. Vengeance, in other words, is an act of war—the act of devastating an enemy, reaping the profit known as 'peace of mind'.]

[But even before his vengeance was complete, that man had slaughtered far too many vampires.]

[This is the personal and terribly lonesome story of two Eaters and their quest for revenge. The conflicts within their hearts, however, are constantly reaching to the world outside in search of answers.]

[But no matter how deep the wounds of their hearts, and no matter how painful their pasts, from the perspective of us vampires, there is but one simple way to react to this tale.]

[Before battle, we shall not flee.]

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Design by Yoshihiko Kamabe


プロローグ?

Prologue A: The Midsummer Watermelon and the Midwinter Alraune

‘Beautiful…’

It thought to itself, seeing the red fluid falling from overhead.

At that very moment, it came to realize its own self-awareness.

It had come to understand its own existence.

But the moment the red liquid touched its body, its mind was overridden in an instant.

It was covered in the stench of blood.

In the end, its time as the ‘original’—the state of being purely itself—lasted approximately a single second. The time it took for it to see the falling blood and feel it covering itself.

Sometimes, it accepted its ever-changing self. At other times, it questioned it.

Not knowing which was closer to its true intention, the newborn vampire quietly began its metamorphosis—in both form and heart.

†

Centuries before ‘it’ had been covered with blood.

In an entirely different place, a very similar being was going through the same physical experience.

Drip. Drip.

But that was not the most accurate way to describe the scene.

Sometimes it came like rain. Other times, it was as though red liquid was being poured upon her by the bucketful, along with the stench of iron.

Yet she quietly accepted her place.

Having neither a sense of self nor a conscious sense of memory, she spent her days doing nothing but accept the world before her.

The red rain was irregular, but continued to fall as though in a routine.

That was because she was rooted underneath a guillotine.

She had only just been born when the gallows overhead were replaced by the beheading mechanism.

The humans kept their eyes trained only upon the criminals to be executed. None turned their gaze down to the ground, where she was rooted alongside the rolling heads.

A single man noticed her presence. The executioner, who had been for a long time cutting off the heads of the criminals, looked at her. There was a complicated emotion in his eyes, a strange mix of sympathy and envy.

But at first, she did not understand.

That was because, up to a certain point, she had no self-awareness.

Her life was coming to an end, and she had just been preparing to connect her life to the next generation.

A certain criminal was being beheaded. The guillotine claimed its prize, showering her in strangely bright and radiant blood.

The crowd that had gathered to watch screamed in unison as they shuddered.

The headless criminal suddenly stood, took hold of the severed head, and scattered into a flock of countless bats—flying off into the distance, out of the executioner's reach.

The sight, though incredible, had once more drawn the crowd's attention away from her—the one who had lived thus far covered in blood.

That was the moment when she was 'born' into a different existence entirely.

†

The two vampires were born at completely different times, at completely different places.

Eventually, they would go on to meet in a place foreign to either of them.

The two vampires, who normally would have rotted away in the lands of their respective births, finally encountered one another—in a majestic castle across the sea, surrounded by peaceful streets.

Prologue B: Nidhogg and Hraesvelgr

He could not even bring himself to shed tears.

The boy did not even realize the fact of his own despair, even in the moment it reached its zenith.

‘Sis. Where’s Sis?’

Not even knowing if he was in his right mind, the boy frantically began to search for the family that should have been by his side.

Everything was consumed by chaos—although it was only the boy’s mind that was in confusion, so to be more accurate, everything that mattered to the boy was consumed by chaos.

He could not tell if it was night or day.

He could not register if his surroundings were bright or dark.

He could not figure out if he was standing outside or indoors.

And yet the boy continued to look for his sister.

As the boy searched, not even knowing what he should do or say once he found her, even greater despair swelled before him in a powerful wave.

What first hit him was the stench.

A tepid breeze. He could feel it in his nostrils. It began to agitate his sense of smell.

Agitation.

Agitation.

It agitated his nerves, his memories, his life, and even his purpose.

The odor that battered away at his heart was a primal one, reminiscent of the smell of rusted metal.

‘This is blood.’

At the moment of realization, the boy felt his stomach lurch.

He shut his eyes in an attempt to deny everything his senses were telling him.

But the stench was much too powerful and cruel. It grew denser and denser, as though sneering at the boy.

But the boy knew—

That the one who was actually sneering at him was standing right before him, carrying the source of the stench.

The boy shut his eyes tight.

But things would not get better. The world full of despair would not disappear.

Time would not turn back.

Reality surrounded his world, waiting for the boy to open his eyes and accept it.

But the boy rejected it with all his might.

Once he opened his eyes, things will have changed, the boy assured himself, as he slowly gathered the courage to face forward.

Was it just a nightmare?

Was it just a hallucination?

Was it just someone's idea of a joke?

Was it just a fanciful story he had written out on paper?

He had not imagined anything so specific for his immediate future, but the boy wished fervently that reality would disappear from his sight.

Was this what it felt like to have hit someone with a car, he wondered, his thoughts drifting to things more morbid than fantastic. Although he knew he was running away, the boy decided to accept his own flight. If it meant he could escape from this reality, he would gladly accept a lie.

Once he opened his eyes—

All he had to do was open them—

As he placed his hopes on his eyelids, a voice reached his ears and cruelly shattered the boy's wishes to bits.

"Hey… why won't you open your eyes?"

The boy twitched.

He did not know if he was scared or angry.

His eyes snapped open at the voice, and he turned his gaze to its source. He could not move his face or the rest of his body. The voice alone was enough to petrify him.

"You can look at us, you know. You're going to hurt our feelings."

It was a kind, gentle voice.

But the boy knew—the voice was despair cloaked in kindness. Everything existed to make him despair.

The voice that embraced him warmly was despair incarnate.

The boy fought his nausea as he fixed his gaze at the source of the voice. There were two figures before his eyes.

One figure was carrying the other in its arms.

It was much like the fairytale image of a prince carrying a princess.

After all, the figure being carried was, to the boy, a true princess.

His beloved older sister. His only blood relative.

'My… only blood relative…'

The boy repeated the words to himself over and over again.

Until not too long ago, the boy had others to call family—his parents—but now it was just down to him and his sister.

Their parents had only just been murdered by the vampire—the monster—holding his sister. He could smell their blood from the creature, who bathed in the red while it was still warm.

And the third smell of blood.

The thin stream of blood flowing from his sister's neck.

"...Sis..."

"That hurts. Are you just going to ignore me?" The smiling vampire casually asked the trembling boy.

"H-how… how could you… how could you…? I… I trusted you…"

"Hah hah! Thanks for trusting me, then." The monster laughed, apologizing. "I really enjoyed the look you had on your face when I betrayed you."

The vampire remained as friendly as ever. That fact pushed the boy even deeper into the abyss of despair.

Everything began when the boy and the girl—his childhood friend—went to explore the woods together.

Pulling along his hesitant friend, he had stepped inside an abandoned house deep in the woods, which was rumored to be haunted. And there they came face-to-face with a vampire.

At first, they could not believe their eyes. Then, they fell into panic. But their fears were soon assuaged, and from that point on, the boy began to treat the vampire as a friend.

Having accepted the fact that vampires did, in fact, exist, the boy's simple heart thought:

'I knew it. So there are good vampires out there, too.'

Just as it was possible for one good deed of an evil man to completely reverse other people's perception of him, the vampire's kind and gentle character destroyed any fears the boy might have had about the supernatural.

The boy and the girl visited the abandoned house every single day.

They heard all kinds of things from their new friend. About being bitten and turned into a vampire. Hiding in that cottage after being harshly persecuted by humans. Being able to live without drinking blood. The fact that it had been an entire year since this vampire had been able to speak with others as they were speaking now.

It was all the stuff of storybooks to the boy. A very personal epic, recounted to him by his new friend.

That was why the boy both admired and trusted the vampire a great deal more than he did the humans he thought were very boring.

That was why he had brought the vampire to his home.

He wanted to bring that friendly vampire into his world—to the place where his most beloved people were.

But the boy was terribly mistaken.

He had underestimated the creature known as the vampire.

'Wow… A vampire that's willing to make friends with humans…', he had thought, impetuously judging between vampires—creatures that a human like him knew nothing about.

It was only much later that he came to regret that act.

Because at the moment, the boy was too busy falling even further than the abyss of despair.

Suddenly, something that resembled a watermelon rolled before his feet.

He did not have to take a close look to see what it was.

His father's head.

The moment the realization struck him, the boy screeched, casting rational thought to the winds.

Though he never intended it, his body moved on its own to squeeze the air out of his lungs.

As his entire body screamed out in terror, the boy's consciousness spotted something else.

His mother's body, lying just out of the corner of his eye.

The unnatural hole gaping through her chest. It was as though the reddish blackness was staring into his soul.



His scream did not stop.

The vampire, as though matching his rhythm, smiled with a snap of the fingers.

Crunch. There was a crisp impact as something fell before the boy's feet.

What initially looked to be a large mass would more aptly be described as small.

Falling to the floor with a terribly realistic noise was the body of a child the same age as the boy.

The body was entirely unharmed, unscathed save for the odd angle as which its neck was twisted.

The classmate upon whom the boy had been nursing a crush.

Corpses rolled before his eyes like a scene out of a freakish play.

It crushed the boy's heart in such a simple, yet indescribably grotesque manner.

The boy once again closed his eyes.

A second later, a powerful presence drew very close to his face. He could not hear any breathing, but they were probably close enough that his own breath would probably reach.

The vampire was there.

That was all he could know.

That was all he wanted to know.

Before that overwhelming presence, the despair and outrage that had for a moment consumed him disappeared completely.

"Please… spare me…"

The boy found himself asking for mercy. Begging for his life.

Even though he lost the people he loved most right before his eyes—even though his nemesis was right there in front of him.

"Please… spare me… Don't kill me…"

His lips continued to plead for his life. His tightly shut eyes shed tears that ran down his cheeks and fell to the ground.

He was soon enveloped by a gentle voice.

"Don't be stupid. I would never kill you."

"Ah… hic…"

“We’re friends, aren’t we?” The vampire said, with too soft a voice for such cruel words.

The boy found himself feeling relieved.

He was relieved at the thought that he had, at least, managed to keep his own life. But only a moment later, his relief turned to loathing at his own selfishness.

‘Everyone… everyone is dead… So why am I relieved*?!’*

The realization once more kindled the sparks of outrage, but the boy could do little more than speak to the monster before him.

“Why…”

“Hm?”

“Why… why did you kill them?!”

He did not recall the circumstances clearly, but the conclusion was clear.

The vampire he brought home had proceeded to cruelly murder his parents and classmate.

“Tell me. Why?! What did I—what did *they* ever do to *you*?!”

Listening to the boy’s cries, choked with sobs, the vampire that most definitely stood before him quietly began to speak.

To the boy, whose eyes were still tightly shut, the vampire’s voice was all that comprised the world.

He focused his every sense into his ears and waited without intending—for he was petrified with fear.

“Why? Let me tell you why.”

The voice quietly cocooned the boy as though trying to soften his rigor.

“It’s because I love you two so very much.”

‘Us “two”?’

The monster’s words finally reminded the boy of his childhood friend.

‘Now that I think about it… Where is she? Is she all right? …No, before any of that… I have to help Sis!’

The boy quickly abandoned his worry for his friend and quietly opened his eyes.

His sister was in the vampire’s arms, a thin stream of blood flowing from her already-pale neck. Without moving the rest of her body, she turned her head toward her little brother.

She was beautiful.

The boy was gladdened by the fact that his sister was able to move of her own will.

His face relaxed ever-so-slightly as he felt his fears alleviate for a moment.

His sister looked at him with a smile.

She then put her arms around the vampire's neck and brought her lips to him.

"Wha…"

She was no longer even looking at her brother.

And—

†

I opened my eyes.

"…"

It was a dream—a vivid memory of what happened over ten years ago.

That was a refreshing nap. A great reminder.

A reminder of my hatred toward him.

A reminder of what I have to do for revenge.

But it's a good thing I didn't see any more.

That's right. There was more to the story than that.

But that part alone I remember clearly. It's so fresh in my mind that I don't need dreams to remind me.

I think… the only reason I made it this far is because of the continuation of that scene of utter despair.

The end of that tragedy somehow became my hope.

I don't know when this hope is going to be fulfilled, but I feel like it's coming closer and closer.

That alone I'm sure of.

I felt a little better. I crushed the fangs of the vampire leaping before me, jaw and all.

There was a repulsive noise. Shards of splintered bone drove themselves into the fingers I controlled.

That hurt.

I see. So this *is* reality.

In other words…

This horde of monsters in front of me are real.

This is a bother. They're all nothing but small fry.

I wish they could have just run off while I was sleeping.

†

The young man stood before the monsters.

The monsters lunging at him froze.

In the blink of an eye, the vampire nearest to the man was lying on the ground with a shattered jaw.

They were an uncanny group of beast-creatures, looking like human forms twisted into animals. It was impossible to tell by appearance if they were vampires or werewolves.

They were the vampires who called this place home, and they had been subjugating the humans of nearby villages for quite some time.

Several months ago, a group of vampire-hunting humans had come to exterminate them, likely having been hired by someone from a nearby village.

But that team of exterminators was almost maddeningly weak. The vampires easily destroyed them, and torched a nearby village in retaliation.

That should have ended everything.

But the foe standing before their eyes was forcibly making it clear—*they* were the ones whose lives were about to end.

In the dark of the abandoned mine—the nest of the vampires and the werewolves under their command—they were very suddenly faced with an enemy.

The enemy was a gigantic suit of armor.

It was of a strange design, a blend of East and West. There was a thick layer of armor over the wearer's face. He seemed to be watching the events unfolding around him through the slits where the eyes should be, but it was impossible for the vampires to see inside the armor.

The reason they concluded that the wearer was a young man was because of the voice that briefly spoke to them.

“Yeah… Just die for me, okay?”

It was a simple command.

As though that was a signal to attack, the monsters instantly prepared for battle.

But the young man’s words were, in fact, *not* what the monsters believed them to be.

Because by the time he had finished his sentence, the battle was already over.

There was a sound like something collapsing. The monsters turned around.

Where they would normally expect to see the vampire leading them standing, all they saw was a headless lump of flesh.

“Huh…?” One of the monsters surrounding the armor uttered.

At that very moment, a gust of wind stroked their faces.

They were one step too late to read the angle from which the wind had blown. By the time they pinpointed the direction, they realized that something had just passed right through them.

The answer to their question was much further back than where their leader had been standing. It had been driven into the dimly-lit wall of the mine.

A white stake, blood and meat dribbling from its sides.

The blood stuck to its surface quickly went grey, then turned to ash and scattered into the mine.

At the same time, the headless body began to dissipate from the neck down, fading to ashes.

‘Where did that come from?’ The monsters found themselves wondering, even before they could feel any sadness about their leader’s death.

The answer was already right before them.

The gigantic suit of armor before them had launched the stake in the middle of the young man’s command.

The attack had come so suddenly that they noticed nothing until well after the fact. Though the man’s armor looked very heavy, they did not even see him lift his arm. What kind of a stance had he thrown the stake from?

The monsters were all occupied by the all-too-sudden fact of their master’s death. But a moment later, they understood what was happening and instantly let their bloodlust loose upon their foe.

But the armored man did not move.

He was neither trying to attack the frantic monsters as they reeled from their master's death, nor was he trying to escape. He only stood there, rooted to the spot.

"KILL HIM!" One of the monsters cried. He seemed to be a vampire like his master, but looked much less refined. At the same time, one of the monsters charged at the armored man.

He was rewarded for his efforts with a shattered jaw.

"Sorry. I was just getting a bit of shut-eye."

The armored man casually shook off the jawbone shards and chunks of flesh from his arm. The voice coming from within was equally laid-back.

"I'm serious. I just fell asleep. Looks like I'm still a bit jet-lagged. That was really close, you know. If you didn't start yelling, I might not have woken up. And you would have killed me for sure."

The armored man looked down upon the jawless vampire rolling on the ground.

"That's right… All that noise woke me up from my terrible nightmare. I should be thanking you twice."

Because the man's face was entirely covered, the monsters looked around at one another, unable to read their foe's expression. Was he being sincere or sarcastic?

But what they *did* know was the fact that this man was much more powerful than they had expected.

As the monsters murmured amongst themselves, unable to take a single step forward, they heard from the armor what sounded like a laugh—

—that moment, the armor continued speaking.

"Thank you. In return, I'll give my all into killing and murdering every last one of you tear you all to pieces not leave a piece of dust and destroy you all—"

By the time he had finished speaking without even pausing to take a breath, half the monsters were lying on the ground without their heads.

The armor looked down upon the still corpses.

"You died because I *beheaded* you? This is just disappointing."

Though the monsters were watching disaster unfold before their very eyes, they could not even twitch.

"This isn't war. This isn't even a battle. This is just a one-sided massacre." The armor said, implicitly mocking the monsters. But they could not even think of retorting.

“Did the officers really have to send *me* of all people for this job? This is too easy.”

One of the werewolves finally snapped out of his daze as the man mumbled to himself. He lobbed the knife he was holding at the armored man.

The knife, flying at a speed unthinkable for humans, was thrown straight at the dark slit in the armor, where the man’s eyes should be.

A crisp metal ring echoed through the mine. At the same time, the werewolf was grabbed by the collar and lifted clear off the ground.

“Wha…?”

Holding him in the air was the man in the gigantic armor.

‘When did he get all the way over here?’

The moment he found himself wondering this, the werewolf felt something stabbing into his neck.

It was the knife he had thrown earlier. He had seen neither the moment it was caught nor the movement of the man, but he found himself in this position before he could even think.

If that was not the supernatural act of stopping time, the man’s movements were clearly inhuman. Of course, to begin with, no human could possibly control time itself.

Thinking this, the werewolf attempted to bluff as much as he could and spoke with the knife still lodged in his neck.

“Y-you… You’re a vamp-”

“*Don’t* treat me like one of them.”

The tip of the knife was buried deeper into his neck. The werewolf could not finish his sentence.

But as though in his place, another vampire came to the answer—about the human creatures who possessed power greater than vampires.

“Bastard… You’re an Ea-”

A stake came flying towards him from the armor. The vampire’s head flew off, his mouth still agape.

Watching the corpse collapse to the ground, the armor said without a hint of emotion:

“That’s right.”

The monsters watching them had no idea *what* their friend had been right about, but they realized the state of their being—mortal peril.

Their allies were slain one by one like pieces of trash. But the enemy probably considered them to be even less than that. He annihilated them one by one, so casual that he might as

well have been doing something as natural as breathing. Several of the monsters finally turned to flee into the mine shafts.

Their heads exploded one by one, in the order in which they had turned.

There was a dry impact as stakes drove themselves into the walls of the mine, followed shortly by the sounds of heads being crushed.

The first vampire to be beheaded was already turning to ash. Blood spouted from the werewolves' bodies as they lay on the ground without so much as twitching.

The armor, in the midst of attacking the fleeing monsters one by one, heard the words of a male vampire who had remained rooted to the spot.

"P-please… spare—"

Without even letting the vampire finish, the armored man covered his fanged mouth with his hand.

"Hey… You just tried to beg for your life."

In spite of his nonchalant tone, the armored man slowly began to apply more pressure to the hand covering the vampire's mouth.

"…*Don't*. Killing someone who begs for his life leaves a bad taste in my mouth, you know."

The armored man listened to the vampire's jaw shatter as he laid out his illogical philosophy. At the same time, he jabbed his free hand into the vampire's chest.

Acknowledging the sensation of his hand piercing the vampire's heart, the man fired another stake at a vampire who was attempting to flee. He then turned around and beheaded the female vampire who was opening her mouth from behind him.

"N-no…"

Her head flew into the air mid-sentence, only able to mouth the words she spoke; her lungs would no longer squeeze out air.

"Don't even think about begging me for your life. You're going to leave a bad taste in my mouth." The man repeated himself, sounding slightly anxious, and quietly surveyed the area.

He could still sense the presence of a vampire. It was probably hiding a slight distance away, behind a corner in the mine shafts. The fact that it hadn't yet fled likely meant that it was attempting to ambush him.

The murderer in the gigantic suit of armor entered the shaft, silencing his footsteps.

Despite the fact that he was clad in metal, the joints of the armor made absolutely no noise as he walked. Was the armor built that way, or did its silence speak for its wearer's skill? The vampire hiding in the shadows had no way of knowing.

On that note, the vampire did not notice the armored man approaching. And to add, she no longer had any interest in the identity of the man.

There was nothing she could do. Her trembling mouth, vocal cords, and lungs reacted before her mind could.

“Please spare me…”

It was a tiny voice, sounding very close to being extinguished. The armored man stopped in his tracks.

A second later, he closed the distance in a single leap, not caring for silencing his steps, and looked round the corner.

“Please… don’t kill me…”

The voice of a little girl. The appearance of a little girl. That was all the armor registered.

The skinny little girl fell to her knees, terror clear in her eyes.

‘She’s still a vampire.’ The armored man thought. The girl did indeed bear the presence of a vampire.

A delicious, aromatic smell began to whet his appetite.

“You’re asking me to not kill you? What are you talking about? You vampires are already dead.” He said, feigning nonchalance.

“Ah…”

The girl screamed softly and began to stagger backwards, attempting to escape at any cost. She quickly transformed herself into a single bat. Although most vampires turned into entire flocks, the girl must have been still too young—or perhaps that was the extent of her powers to begin with. Either way, she transformed into a bat the size of a human head and screamed as she began to flutter and flap away.

“No… no… stay back…”

Watching the bat attempting to flee, the man quietly prepared to launch a stake at her.

He froze.

One shot, even one slightly off-aim, would probably annihilate the little bat.

But that shot was never fired.

Each time he tried, he hit a powerful mental block.

The girl’s pleading voice—the voice filled with fear and supplication—reminded him too much of his own past.

“…”

Before he knew it, the bat had disappeared into the mine shafts. The man was left there alone, surrounded by the corpses of werewolves, piles of ash, and icy-cold silence.

“Is that the only one that got away, Rudi?” Someone called to him from behind.

The young man in the armor—Rudi—nodded without even turning back.

“…I’m counting on you, Theresia.” He muttered weakly, and leaned his large back against the wall of the mine. The armor rang out against the wall with a low *clang*, and dust fell from the ceiling.

His companion, Theresia, was a young woman. She was wearing a strange Gothic outfit that was designed for ease of movement. Although her exact age was unclear, she did not look to be an adult quite yet.

“All right. I’ll take care of it.” She said, passing by her friend in the blink of an eye.

She also moved at superhuman speeds, disappearing into the mine shaft as though attempting to outrun her own voice.

Dozens of seconds passed since his partner entered the mines.

Although the vampire’s presence was too vague to be sensed, Rudi heard the sound of the girl’s scream echoing through the mine shaft. With that, their mission was complete.

Several minutes passed. Theresia re-emerged and stepped over to him casually, licking the back of her right hand.

Seeing her feline gesture, Rudi commented:

“Finished eating?”

“Yeah… Sorry. I ate your share too.”

“It’s all right. I’d only get weaker if I ate something that fragile.” Rudi said, averting his eyes from inside the armor and walking towards the exit.

“That’s not going to happen. Our power’s cumulative, not averaged, you know.” Theresia said, as though mocking her partner.

“All we do is *gather*. Make them our own flesh and blood. Their souls, their powers… That’s why we Eaters exist, after all.”

†

‘Revenge. That’s all I want.

‘That’s all.

‘That’s more than enough for me.

‘As a human, I chose this path in order to kill a single vampire.

‘I chose to join them.’

When a human being ate the flesh and blood of a vampire, their bodies went through a metamorphosis. Although they retained their human characteristics, they were granted great endurance and reflexes, as well as faster thought processes. They grew closer in power to the vampires they devoured.

Normally, Rudi could never have dreamed of such a path. Even if he knew about Eaters, an ordinary human boy like him would have had no way of obtaining a vampire's flesh and blood.

But the childhood friends Rudi and Theresia managed to obtain that power.

Ironically, the one who told them of the power of the Eaters was from a large community of vampires, one that his nemesis was not a part of.

This Organization, having heard of what had happened to Rudi and Theresia, immediately realized that the two of them were attacked by a vampire and made contact with them.

But how could Rudi ever trust vampires again? He thought to unleash his rage upon the vampire before him, but he was once again left trembling before the vampire's power.

His fear had once again defeated his hatred.

"...You're afraid, I see. It's only a natural reaction to facing one stronger than oneself." The Organization's officer said plainly. Rudi and Theresia exchanged glances.

"So how would you like to turn nature on its head? How would you like to overcome vampires while remaining human?"

As the children floundered in confusion, the man remembered that he had yet to introduce himself.

"...Ah, excuse me! I am Caldimir the Blue..."

The man calling himself 'Caldimir' then granted to the children both hope and despair.

"Let me get to the point. If you agree to serve us, we will give you power. You must abandon your humanity and become lower creatures. And as lower creatures, you will work obediently under our command. That's more than enough compensation for helping you with your quest for vengeance. Hah hah hah... Ah hah hah hah hah..."

And now, Rudi and Theresia were working for the vampires of the Organization. Although they initially worried that the path of an Eater would be needlessly convoluted, that did not turn out to be the case.

Battles granted them power.

The vampires they killed—their blood, their flesh, their screams, their final breaths, their rage, their hatred, their sadness, their twisted joys—it all flowed into them and immensely augmented their powers.

Rudi knew.

He knew that they could now lay ruin upon the monster that had taken everything from him.

He knew that he was probably being used by the Organization.

No, scratch ‘probably’. The Organization was undoubtedly using him. But he had chosen this path because he had no other choice.

All in order to be rid of his fear—to overpower one day the vampire that betrayed him.

As long as he could complete his goal, he would be satisfied. The ends justified the means.

Even if he fell into the fires of purgatory to experience agony greater than what he felt in his past, he would be satisfied—at least the greater pain would serve to erase the grief that still lingered with him.

Rudi resolved himself once more. Theresia spoke up as they reached the mine exit.

“Are you still thinking about that little vampire from just now?”

“...Yeah.”

Theresia.

She was his childhood friend, who had shared in his experiences on that fateful day.

Rudi had no idea why she had chosen the same path as him, and he was not particularly interested in finding out. But her continued presence was undoubtedly a great asset to him.

He had a sort of mental block that stopped him from killing anyone who begged for their life.

He could mercilessly slay anyone who was even about to *begin* pleading, but once he heard their claims to the end, he was completely unable to kill them.

That went doubly so for those who resembled his childhood self.

Supporting him all this time was his childhood friend and fellow Eater, Theresia.

But instead of feeling gratitude towards the friend who covered his weakness, Rudi felt a sort of inferiority complex towards her.

“Damn it… if only she didn’t beg for her life. Normally I could kill women or children without even blinking.”

“Huh. I kill vampires because I have to, but… to be honest, it’s not the best feeling in the world.”

“Now that’s just ridiculous. Although I guess I’m not really one to talk.”

Rudi’s helmet turned slightly, as though he was feeling somewhat awkward. Theresia continued with a blank look.

“It’s our goal to eliminate vampires who subjugate people without a good reason—the vampires who aren’t a part of the Organization. But do we really have to go so far as to kill little kids like her? Although I can’t even answer that question myself. I guess I’m just too desensitized to killing them by now.”

“…She’s a vampire. One of the ones who torched that village.”

“Maybe she only became a vampire today. Or maybe she was coerced into joining them. Same with those werewolves. Those vampires you killed before they had a chance to beg for their lives… by your logic, were they all guilty enough to be killed without pity?”

There was no emotion in Theresia’s voice. Rudi replied in much the same way.

“…Guilt, huh? You’re right. If we killed them even though they hadn’t done anything to deserve it, then…”

“Then?”

“Then maybe they were just plain unlucky.” Rudi found himself replying, but he knew that that was an answer that even he could not accept. And as though in an attempt to shake off the weight of the emotion, he forcibly changed the topic.

“Anyway, you’re not one to talk, Theresia. *You’re* the one who ate that girl.”

“That’s why I said that I’m desensitized to it all now.” She replied with a smile.

Seeing the joyful grin Theresia flashed him, Rudi once more sensed the distance they had walked since that day. How far they had come.

But he had no regrets.

“Not much longer, now.”

He *must* not have any regrets.

“Just a little bit longer, I think.”

If he hadn’t distanced himself from the past, he would have no hope of standing on even ground with his enemy.

“…That vampire… he must be close. He must be right beside us.”

Filling his fists with his unfounded confidence, Rudi stepped out of the mine.

The suit of armor, fresh out of a massacre, was bathed in the gentle moonlight. Rudi recalled the name of the cursed vampire who brought him this far.

“Killing you won’t be enough for me. This might sound pretty overdone, but I… I am going to pay you back for everything you’ve done to me. I’ll make you feel that same pain. I’ll take away everything you hold dear. Do you remember…? You’d *better*. You’d better remember all this, Theo! Theodosius M. Waldstein!”

Nidhogg and Hraesvelgr, the beasts who devoured corpses.

Those were their nicknames.

The two Eaters, feared and scorned by the vampires who called them as such, set forth on their next mission.

They headed for the place known as ‘The Monster’s Paradise’—the island of Growerth.

Prologue C: The Petty Mayor

Neuberg City Hall. The Island of Growerth, Germany.

‘Things never change.

‘Right. The biggest headaches always show their faces when I wanna avoid them the most.’

There was a youthful man sitting in the ostentatious seat in the middle of the mayor’s office.

He was wearing a navy blue suit and a set of glasses perfectly suited to a tactician. The light reflected off the lenses in such a way that his eyes were obscured from sight.

The man tapped on his luxury mahogany desk with his index finger and addressed the secretary before him.

“...And? Someone’s here?”

The secretary, a woman in an expensive suit, responded calmly to the irritated man. She gave off an unusually seductive air, making her look less like an office worker than a woman running a high-class bar.

“Yes, sir. This letter is all the proof we have, but there’s no doubt about it. It’s him.”

“Talk about a pain in the ass...”

The man—the mayor—violently snatched the letter from the woman, behaving nothing like a man of his position and influence should.

“Shit. And I gotta get over to the count’s place for the Carnale Festival soon.”

The Carnale Festival was a celebration held in honor of the artist Carnald Strassburg, who was born and raised in the city of Neuberg on the island of Growerth.

The most famous man in the history of the island, Strassburg was at once a painter, a musician, a playwright, and even an actor. ‘Artist’ was one way of describing him, but he was, to be more true to his reputation, a professional entertainer.

Strassburg had worked as the court painter in Waldstein Castle several centuries ago. And now, the castle—now merely a tourist attraction—would take center stage in the festivities hosted by the entire island.

In the spotlight of the festival was the mayor of the city of Neuberg (the city to which the castle belonged).

Neuberg was a very recently-formed city, born from the merging of the two settlements on the south side of the island—the cities of Rukram and Mozartzungen. The governments of the two cities were completely reformed in the merge. But thanks to support from the citizens, the mayor of Rukram was once again made to govern this new city.

This year's Carnale Festival was the biggest event ahead of the city since its recent founding, and it was simultaneously one of the island's greatest honors.

But the mayor's eyes scanned the contents of the letter with a look of supreme irritation.

He then stared down at the paper in the envelope for some time.

Eventually, he tossed it to the floor as though he had lost interest in it altogether.

"Oh? Wasn't that an important letter, Watt?"

As soon as the scrap of paper fluttered to the ground, a woman's voice sounded from somewhere in the room.

The secretary looked around, eyes wide as dinner plates.

And before she knew it, there was a woman standing behind the mayor.

The woman was of Asian descent, wearing a white jacket and still young enough to be a student. Her long hair was tied back, and her dark eyes were glaring daggers at the back of the mayor's head.

The woman's words themselves were quite agreeable, but there was no affection or friendship in her eyes. There was an air of hatred and something else over her expression, making it very difficult to read her intentions.

"...Tracking dirt all over the mayor's office with those muddy shoes? Why, you're just a fur coat shy of being a dog, eh?"

"Hey, *everyone's* wearing shoes here, you know."

"You're a poor excuse for a Japanese if I've ever seen one. If you're in someone else's place, you take off your shoes. And while you're at it, why don'cha try touching the floor with your head, too?"

"What are you, a moron?"

At first glance, they looked rather like a pair of friends affably showering one another with vitriol. But upon closer inspection, it was clear that neither party was making any attempt to hide their bloodlust or scorn. To be specific, the bloodlust belonged to the woman and the scorn belonged to the man.

As if to prove that observation, the woman suddenly jabbed her arm clean through the mayor's chest.

Her slender hand, covered with blood, emerged from his back.

"Wha...?!"

The secretary screamed without even thinking. The mayor made a face and turned his head towards the Asian woman.

“Hey, hey. This suit was freaking expensive. I’d like to see an unemployed vagrant like you try and pay it off, Shizune.”

The mayor glared at the woman, looking sincerely annoyed by the fact that his suit was ruined. He then wiped the blood from his glasses and produced a pair of sunglasses from his desk, switching them out for no particular reason.

As the mayor went on like nothing in the world was wrong, the woman—Shizune Kijima—muttered to him,

“…Hmph. Looks like you’ve left your heart somewhere else. Turning into a regular pansy now, are we?”

“I prefer the term ‘pragmatic’. I’m just watching out for a certain bitch who’s trying to steal my heart away.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Watt. I’m not necessarily going to kill you. All I want to do is make your life a living hell.”

The secretary could feel the air growing cold. She kept her eyes trained on both Shizune and the mayor, standing powerlessly before the mahogany desk.

“I could even go out and turn myself into a mass murderer in the city streets *right now*. Remember, humans are no longer my allies.”

“Don’t underestimate our police force.”

The tension in the air froze solid. But several seconds of silence later, Shizune sighed as though in defeat.

“I was kidding. Your cops don’t scare me, but I’d hate to turn those guys at the *castle* against me. Who’d have thought it’d be full of *monsters*?”

“True. Most of ‘em were away when you first came to Growerth.”

Shizune Kijima was once a Hunter and an Eater. She had come to this island over a year ago, and through certain circumstances found herself turned into a vampire.

At the time, she had targeted a vampire they called a ‘viscount’ and his family. She had cornered them nearly to the point of victory, but now they were under the watchful protection of powerful creatures that she could not dare to attack without good reason.

“And that moronic count couldn’t go without hosting that fighting tournament last summer. Where the hell’d that come from?”

“The *viscount*. He invited me, too. I didn’t accept, but I went to check it out quietly. Seriously… what’s with that castle? Werewolves, maids, scylla, witches, flower girls, robots, and skeletons. I thought I wandered into a local world fair by accident or something. And each and every one of them—this is going to sound pretty cliched—had this incredible power.”

Shizune did not want to pursue this line of thought any further. She turned to the secretary in an attempt to change the topic.

“So, is Miss Trembling-in-Her-Boots over there one of *your* people, too?”

The mayor did not respond to Shizune’s derisive tone, but he answered her question.

“That’s right. A newbie from the Organization. She’s not used to this job yet, but I’m happy enough with a functional meatshield.”

“Huh. That’s a surprise. I can’t believe you’re still with the Organization.”

“Speaking of… perfect timing. I wanted to ask you something.”

“…What?”

Shizune made a dubious face and came round to the other side of the desk. The mayor gestured at the secretary to hand Shizune the letter.

“?”

[I shall forgive all transgressions, Mayor. But I shall also take back all that is mine, Mayor.]

It was a complete mystery.

Shizune tried to read the signature scrawled at the bottom of the letter, but everything was written in cursive and was in German. She could not read a single word.

“If you want me to react to this, you’re going to have to give me a translation or something.”

“Let me ask you a question, Shizune Kijima.”

The mayor ignored her complaint and went straight to the point. He went on to speak of the one who had signed the letter.

“About what happened last year… Are you absolutely sure that you ate every last bit of Melhilm Herzog?”

‘Ah, damn it.

‘Things never change.

‘The biggest headaches always show their faces when I wanna avoid them the most.

‘So this must be another headache just waiting to blow my brains out.

‘And so what? I know it’s coming now.

‘All I have to do is knock it aside. Trample it to pieces.

‘Don’t you think so, Count? Tell me I’m right, Gerhardt F. Waldstein.’

Prologue D: The Vampire Doctor and the Bizarre Professor

—Hello!

“Hm? What business have you with an old man like me, boy?”

<Oh! Come in, come in! What is it? What is it? We haven’t had any guests in soooooo long! Doctor and I will do everything we can to help you!>

—Uh. The viscount said that the two of you could answer my questions.

“Hoh hoh. And he sent you to this old man?”

<Hooray! The viscount is counting on us. I feel so loved!>

—No, well, um… The thing is, there’s this girl I really really like. But I think she must be really shy or something, because she never looks at me. I wanna know more about her and understand her better, but then I realized that I don’t even know much about her body.

“…Hm? Young man, are you by any chance a stalker?”

<Girls hate tenacious guys, you know!>

—Wait, no! No! I’m not a stalker! Um, what I’m trying to say is… I want to know more about her body. Or, more to the point, I was wondering if there was some sort of a love potion that works on vampires.

“Sitting back to make others do your dirty work, young man? What is the world coming to these days?”

<That’s no good! A real man has to properly *earn* a girl’s heart!>

—That’s not what I meant! Uh… I… I don’t mind if the love potion only lasts for a little bit. But I’m confident that if she looks at me even for a second, I can do everything she wants of me! I even have our future all planned out! I’m going to build us a little house on the hill on the east side of the island. I’m going to become an author and work on storybooks about good vampires and live a happy life with her. I guess we’ll have… three kids? Or maybe more. The more the merrier, right? Especially when it comes to family.

“…Family, eh? Indeed you’re right, boy. Family is a wonderful thing.”

<That’s a wonderful imagination you have! I’m floored! I’m super-duper shocked! But there’s one tiny problem. Does the vampire you like have a humanoid form? If not, you might not be able to have children at all!>

—…Huh?! S-seriously?!

“Now that I think on it… Yes, Waldstein Castle is indeed home to a great assortment of non-human creatures. Yet how many among them have evolved sufficiently on the level of the soul that they would be capable of reproducing with humans, I wonder? Though it is true that many of them are quite close to humans in mindset alone, if nothing else. In other words… hmm… Professor. Explain!”

<Yes, Doctor! You see, creatures that humans call monsters—vampires included—are usually beings that have evolved in a different direction from humans. For example, think of a branching diagram that represents the evolution of species. We ‘others’ are creatures that have crossed from the two-dimensional plane of the diagram to the third dimension.>

—So does that mean that humans and vampires really are completely different? But, um… I heard that our mayor was born from a vampire-human couple…

“Ah, there is, in fact, nothing anomalous about such an occurrence. Let us return to the branching diagram. Supposing that it has been drawn on the floor, the branch that extends into the third dimension would be reaching into the air. But from a bird’s-eye view, this three-dimensional branch overlaps with the human branch, making the diagram look no different from a two-dimensional image. In other words, physically speaking, they are nearly identical. And as for the differences… well… Professor, do explain.”

<Yes, Doctor! So if we suppose that the two-dimensional diagram represents the evolution of the body, the three-dimensional branch represents an evolution of the soul!>

—‘The soul’?

“A catch-all term we use for a certain phenomenon. If the second dimension pertains to physical form, the third dimension covers the evolution of abilities, if we could call it that. Abilities that allow vampires to turn into bats or fog, or allow them to use telekinesis… or even activate their weaknesses to sunlight or crucifixes. All of these characteristics can be attributed to the evolution of the soul.”

<The evolution of the soul has a big impact on the evolution of the body, too. That’s why we all have such varied characteristics, even though we were derived from humans! Although we still don’t know very much about what we vampires call the soul.>

—Huh. Uh… I’ve got it! In other words, Ferret’s soul is more beautiful than the souls of us humans! That makes so much sense!

“Were you even listening to me, young man?”

<Wow! Was Miss Ferret the vampire you were talking about?! That’s amazing! I don’t think you’ll have anything to worry about. Physically speaking, Miss Ferret is nearly identical to a human! You see, vampires who were turned from human beings are always guaranteed to be able to reproduce with humans. But vampires who were born to a pair of vampires are more likely to have evolved further away from humanity.>

—Wha…?! Then—

“Worry not, young man.”

<Don’t worry! Miss Ferret is special! An anomaly among anomalies. Other than her prolonged youth, superhuman strength, and regenerative capabilities, Miss Ferret is physically closer to humans than most other vampires! She doesn’t even have any weaknesses, so she could live happily ever after with a human as long as nothing terrible happens to her. If no one gets suspicious about the fact that she stops aging after a while, that is!>

—That’s all right, then! Because *I’m* never going to get suspicious of her! That’s because I already understand everything. Wow! This is crazy! This means that Ferret and I were *made* for each other. I don’t need a love potion after all. We were destined to be together from the very beginning!

“Young man, were you… born this way?”

<Amazing! Normally boys like you would get shut down in an instant, but you’re so easygoing that you might be all right. Maybe you’d be a great match for Miss Ferret after all! But I think ‘destiny’ is a bit of an exaggeration. If she turns you down, wouldn’t it mean she’s denying you your future?>

—I don’t see anything wrong with that.

“...”

<Wh…what?>

—If Ferret and I aren’t destined to be together, and she turns me down, *I’m* the only one that has to be sad about it. But I’m never going to make Ferret sad. I’m *never* going to turn her away. I’ll accept everything about her! And if she doesn’t like me, I’ll accept that too. But I still wouldn’t give up.

“Young man, do you even realize that you are spouting hypocrisy?”

<Maybe you should take some time to get everything straight in your head.>

—I know I’m contradicting myself, but that doesn’t matter! True love doesn’t lose to hypocrisy! And there’s nothing hypocritical about me loving Ferret. Because that’s the only thing that’s leading me. I don’t get all this stuff about spears and shields, but that’s all just a distraction! ‘Ferret, you’re the only truth in my life’… what do you think? Isn’t that a great line? All right, looks like I have today’s proposal! The world’s starting to look brighter already. It’s all thanks to you, Doctor! Professor! I understand why the viscount introduced you to me—you’ve helped me out so much, even though we’re total strangers! Goodbye now! Thank you for everything! I’m coming, Ferret!

†

“My word. What brought that human boy here in the first place?” Doctor wondered with a sigh, once the boy had energetically bounced out of the room. “Michael, his name was. That boy may very well go on to become something great.”

<Doctor, I've never met a human being before who didn't say a thing about the way we look.>

"He'd be the first, even counting vampires and other monsters. In fact, there wasn't a hint of confusion in his eyes as he looked at us. As though there were nothing more natural than our appearances."

Doctor picked up a steaming mug and shook his head with a smile.

Sipping the red fluid in the mug, he slowly cast a glance at the being next to him.

"Even setting me aside, he showed no hint of surprise at *you*, Professor."

<Eek! You're embarrassing me, Doctor! Please don't look at me like that!>

The creature speaking in such a way, awkwardly turning left and right, was a terribly strange, outlandish, and bizarre being.

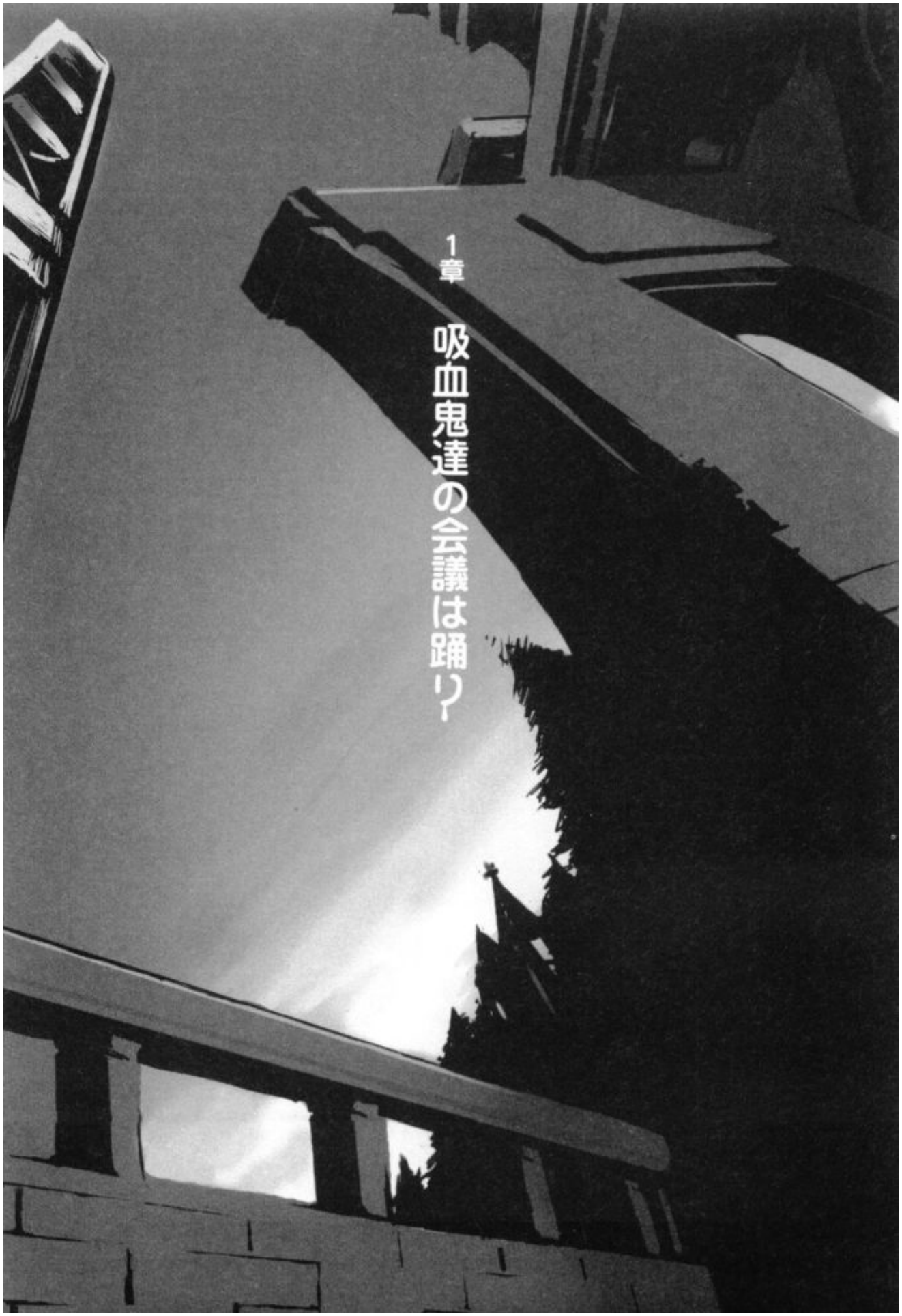
Though Professor knew very well of her own freakishness, she did not show a hint of shame in her voice.

Doctor drained his mug and remembered the boy who had just come and gone.

"…I'm quite envious of that boy."

Not a single ray of sunshine reached the room. Illuminated only by cold, artificial light, Doctor put on a lonely but happy smile.

But for some reason, there was also a hint of jealousy on his lips.



1章 吸血鬼達の会議は踊り？

Chapter 1: The Council of Vampires Dances, and...

In the beginning, there was color.

Tables were laid out in the deep darkness.

It was a large room. A small-scale banquet hall in which were set up many small, round tables.

The walls of the room were majestically decorated, but because there were only a few candles lighting the area, any extravagance it might have borne was concealed in the shadows. In fact, the uneven illumination of the decoration lent a chilly air to the hall.

Pieces of cloth, each of a different color, were draped on the backs of the chairs at the tables.

Filling the banquet hall was not the presence of people, but the splashes of color flaunting their hues in the emptiness.

Suddenly, a man appeared in the deserted room.

The man, looking to be in his late twenties, carried himself much like a scholar. There was a pair of round spectacles over his eyes.

“...Ahem. Let us begin proceedings.”

The man, who had taken a seat at the chair with the blue cloth draped over its back, looked around at the many seats in the darkness and spoke.

“Hm... This is no time for tasteless pranks, my friends. Show yourselves.”

The darkness had no response for the man.

“...”

He waited several seconds for a reaction, but the room remained silent.

“...Is... no one really here yet...?”

The man’s confident expression faded as he slid out of his chair.

“...ssing...”

He lay on the floor without even making to stand. He crouched there with his head in his hands, mumbling to himself.

“...Urgh... That was *embarrassing*! There was *no one* here! ‘This is no time for tasteless pranks, my friends. Show yourselves’? Shameful! It’s not as though I’m a terrified ignoramus who screams ‘I know you’re out there!’ in the middle of the night when there’s really nothing there! I made an *effort* to sit down without making a sound, but nobody saw it! Damn it, that was a one-man comedy show! This is *embarrassing*! I have to kill myself. I’ll go back in time and kill myself five minutes ago! This is TOO EMBARRASSING!”

Dignity drained from the man as he rolled on the floor screaming to himself.

Several minutes passed. The man heard the *click* of the door opening, and came back to his senses.

The woman who entered the hall stopped in her tracks, bemused by the sight.

“...Why are you rolling on the floor, Caldimir the Blue?”

“...Never mind, Dorothy. I tripped on a chair.”

The man called Caldimir stood as though nothing had happened, and once again took his seat with dignity.

Meanwhile, the woman called Dorothy gave him a dubious look and took a seat quite far away, at a chair draped with white.

From that point on, many men, women, and creatures so inhuman that their genders were not immediately clear began to filter into the hall, each taking their seats one by one.

By the time half the seats were filled, Caldimir, whose blue seat had a clear view of the entire hall, said the same thing as he had before as he tried to quiet the occupants of the room.

“...Ahem. Let us begin proceedings.”

His elbows were on the table, and his chin rested on his clasped hands. A pose worthy of a true mastermind. The banquet hall went silent at his call. It was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

“I, Caldimir the Blue Flow of Blood, will act as the chairman of today’s conference. I expect there will be no objections.”

A smile-happy man sitting at the yellow seat raised his hand with a cry of “Objection!”.

“I see there are no objections. Then allow me to disclose the main objective of today’s conference.”

“Are you ignoring me, Mr. Caldimir?”

The man sitting at the yellow seat did not hide his displeasure as he interrupted Caldimir.

“Be quiet. Why don’t you go ahead and stuff yourself with curry, as your color should?” Said the man sitting in the indigo seat.

Strangely enough, the men at the yellow and indigo seats had identical facial features. But the man in the yellow seat had blond hair and blue eyes, while the man in the indigo seat had black hair and black eyes. The caucasian man complained at the Asian man’s interjection.

“You might be my big brother, but even *I* don’t get what you say sometimes. What’s this about curry? Anyway, you’re not even a member of Rainbow. Keep your mouth shut, will ya?”

“Indigo *is* a color of the rainbow.”

“In England, the rainbow’s only six colors. There *is* no indigo. Just ‘cause you live in Japan and they say there’s seven colors—”

“Hmph. Don’t be so ignorant, little brother. From a scholarly perspective, even the English agree that there are seven colors in the rainbow.”

Caldimir the Blue, ignoring the brothers’ increasingly tangential argument, calmly continued to address the others gathered at the conference.

“In any case… As I mentioned recently, a certain phenomenon has been brought to our attention. Recall last year’s incident, where a lone vampire managed the feat of synchronizing with the entire island of Growerth. The research undertaken by our friend Melhilm the Violet has finally borne fruit! Yet the problem remains in that our all-important ‘Relic’ remains in the hands of our *former* comrade, Gerhardt F. Waldstein. What is our next course of action, then? This is why I have called this conference. Hm… Seeing as over half of our officers—the Colors—are here, I see that my influence is nothing short of stupendous at this point.”

Caldimir’s satisfaction at only half of the officers being gathered likely meant that attendance was low at best at most conferences. Caldimir was quite smug, but his moment of pride was interrupted by the man in the yellow seat, who had just come out of arguing with the man in the indigo seat.

“Like any of us are here to see *you*. I’m only here ‘cause you mentioned Mr. Gerhardt and I wanted to show my respect for him.”

“Ha! Show your respect for a traitor like *him*? Preposterous.” Caldimir said, maintaining his cool demeanor. But the Asian man sitting at the indigo seat mumbled as though supporting his brother.

“If I recall correctly, he only *left* us. There was no betrayal.”

“Anyway! Let us return to the matter at hand!” Caldimir cried in an attempt to drown out the Asian man.

The air in the banquet hall finally grew solemn as the conversation was brought back on track.

But Caldimir ended up destroying the moment of calm with his own two hands.

“Because I had already foreseen such an occurrence, I have taken it upon myself to take immediate measures. I have dispatched our currently-absent comrade Zygmunt the Green, along with Rudi the Nidhogg and Theresia the Hraesvelgr as Melhilm’s guides as they infiltrate the island of Growerth!”

“What…?!”

Sound once again returned to the hall at the chairman’s revelation.

“Hmph. If I’d had it my way, I would have dispatched our fiercest fighters, led by Garde the Black, to annihilate the island. But not even our finest could so easily defeat our target,

Relic F. Waldstein. That is why I've sent in our most flexible forces for this mission. Do you have any questions, my friends?"

Caldimir finished with a laugh. The murmuring in the hall went silent.

The silence soon gave way to a deafening outcry.

"Acting on your own *again*, Caldimir?! What have you done?!"

"Was there even a *point* to calling this conference?!"

"I came to Paris, this backwater city, all the way from *Antarctica*, you hear me?!"

"*Meow!*"

"Why is violence the first conclusion you jump to?!"

"Those three are the biggest loose cannons in the Organization!"

"You talk big, but I bet you sent in Zygmunt because you can't order Garde around, am I right?!"

"Now that I think about it, Garde isn't here today."

"I bet you didn't even send Garde an invitation!"

"Gerhardt is more inclined to listen to reason than any *one* of us here, you idiot!"

"What are you thinking, turning him against you without even attempting to negotiate?!"

"Calling a conference just to announce that you acted on your own? What is this, a dictatorship?!"

"You could have just called or emailed us if you wanted to keep us in the loop!"

"That's not the problem here. Don't drag us into any of *your* creepy plans!"

"*Meow!*"

"I demand that you abdicate your officer position this *instant*!"

"I demand a recount!"

"All of you, SHUT UP!"

Caldimir's determined voice seemed to swallow up the entire banquet hall.

No one had expected such a show of spirit from him. The officers were silenced in the midst of their angry howls.

"Ha… So you have a problem with my actions? Friends, what are we? Power. Yes. Power. With a swing of the arm we destroy tanks, shatter the laws of physics, and persist longer

than any dictator has ever lived. *That* is our true nature. And if you wish to oppose the Blue Flow of Blood—the man who *rules* over power… Then I will accept your challenge. But do *any* of you have the gall to take that chance, I wonder?" Caldimir said, glaring at the occupants of the room without budging an inch.

A terrible, heavy air loomed from behind his back as he threateningly bore down upon the banquet hall.

Under Caldimir's piercing gaze, his tyranny in the fancifully-packaged form of a conference would continue—or so he wished.

"Bring it, asshole!"

A figure leapt forth from the yellow seat, kicking Caldimir in the mouth. His front teeth snapped and went flying as the candlelight shook from the impact.

"Wh… wha-?! You actually attacked—?!"

"Shut up, you third-rate narcissist! You were *asking* for it! And what's wrong with you, calling yourself 'Blue Flow of Blood'? Aren't you even a little embarrassed to call yourself that? What are you, the final boss in a video game? That title's too ostentatious for you, bastard!"

As the young man from the yellow seat berated him, Caldimir shot back:

"Why, you little brat! Out of the goodness of my heart I give you a chance to talk, and you take it as permission to lord it over me?! So be it! Physical strength isn't everything, but I'll show you my true power, right here and now! All right! Anyone who's got a bone to pick with me, *get in line*!"

His broken teeth turned into fog, then returned to his mouth and fixed themselves. Caldimir then made to transform to launch a counterattack at the man from the yellow seat.

"No you don't!"

The Asian man leapt from his indigo seat and turned his right arm into acid. He poured it over Caldimir in the midst of his transformation.

"AAAAAARGH! Th-that was cheap, attacking me before I could transform…"

As if on cue, about half the vampires gathered at the hall leapt from their seats to join the brothers in their attack on Caldimir.

"Ugh… No, sorry… Not all at once… One at a time's enough…"

Caldimir's pleas were soon buried in tremendous noise.

"I suppose the most important qualities in a leader are his charisma and magnetism, not his individual talent. Don't you agree?"

"Indeed. Caldimir is at a great advantage in one-on-one duels, but he can never win if he is outnumbered."

“Our *former* leader was the complete opposite, wasn’t he? He made up for his physical weakness with his amicable personality… Although he’s left us, now.”

“…I am quite surprised that the Organization is still standing, despite this madness erupting at almost every conference.”

The creature sitting in the dark grey seat was speaking with Dorothy, who sat at the white seat. It was as though the brawl against Caldimir had nothing to do with them.

“Really, it’s only Bridgestone the Yellow and Ishibashi the Indigo who are fighting seriously today. It’s a relief that Black, Mirror, Gold, Silver, and Pearl are absent today.”

“That is not the problem, Dorothy.”

“But Romans, it *is*. After all, the Organization lives by no ideology or goal in particular. And it isn’t as though membership grants us money or power. We’re nothing more than a social gathering. A neighborhood meeting. And who would risk life and limb to become the leader of such a group?”

“You are right, Dorothy.”

As Tromm Ed Romans the Dark Grey fell into thought, Dorothy quickly amended her statement.

“I do suppose I’ve forgotten one thing. This Organization of ours *does* share a singular goal. The goal of protecting ourselves from human persecution.”

“Yes. Of course.”

‘Dark Grey’—the creature agreeing with Dorothy—trembled slightly. His appearance was something straight out of a horror movie—a strange mixture of centipede, beetle, construction machinery, and predatory dinosaur. It was difficult to imagine from his appearance, but he seemed to be smiling.

Dorothy was unfazed by this strange sight. She once more went over the situation at hand.

“Zygmunt is a loyal follower of Caldimir. At this point, we have no way of stopping this mission with words alone. And setting the viscount aside, we’ll have a terrible mess on our hands if we turn his familiars against us. And as for the rest… We have Melhilm’s future actions to be wary of. If only he would refrain from allowing his personal emotions to get the better of him.”

Melhilm was the officer to whom the color violet had been assigned. Dark Grey had also heard that Melhilm shared a history with several individuals on the island.

“On that note, what of those two Eaters? Will they be all right?”

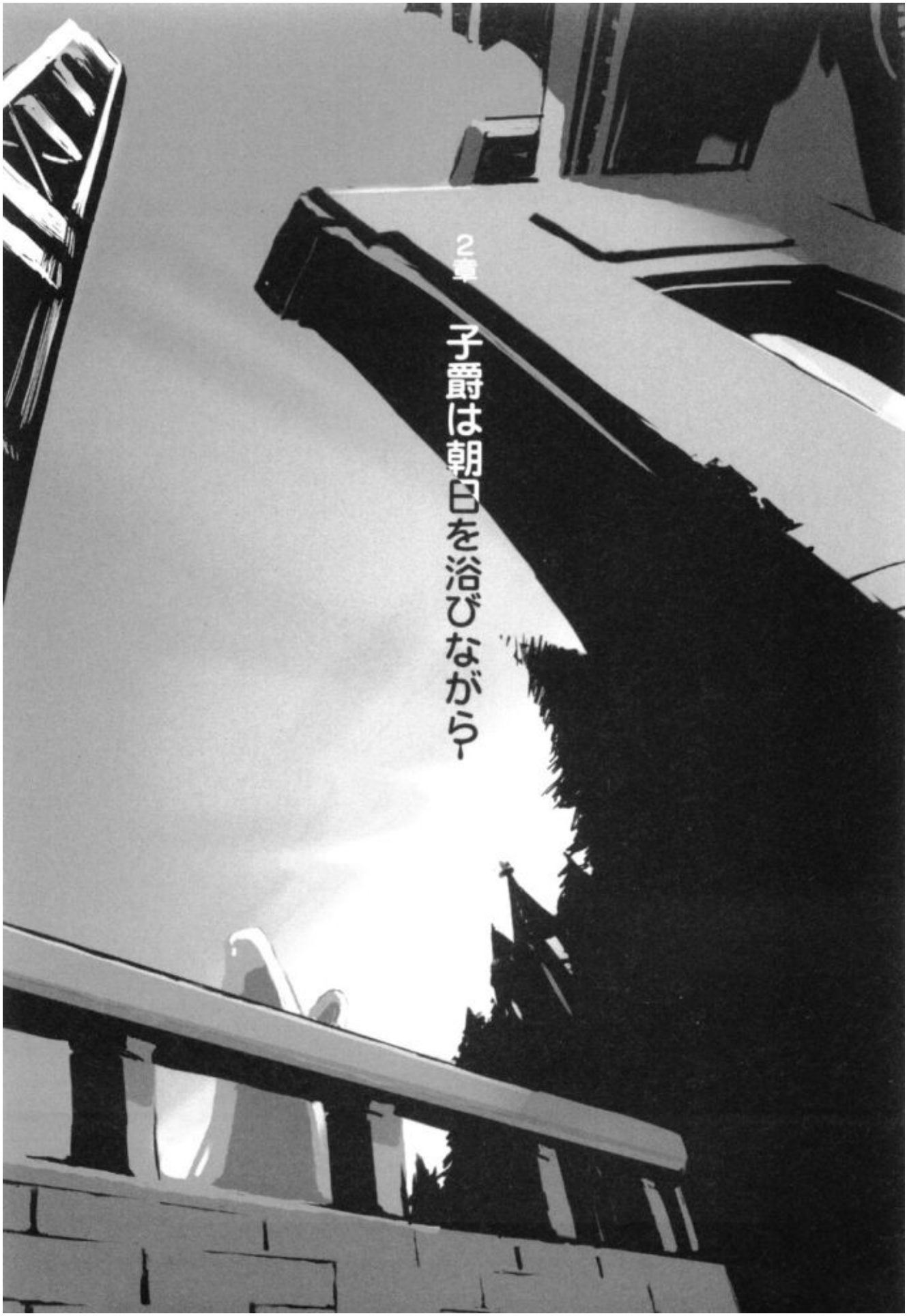
“…Rudi and Theresia? Oh, yes… they may not be able to control themselves once they find out that they were sent to deal with members of the Waldstein family.”

“Hm… I’ve never personally met Gerhardt myself. What kind of a man is he?”

“Oh, the viscount?”

Dorothy smiled nostalgically. She recalled the former member of their Organization as Caldimir's screams echoed behind them.

"...What kind of a man is he...? Well, I suppose I should say... He can sometimes be a very difficult man to understand."



2章 子爵は朝日を浴びながら？

Chapter 2: The Viscount Basks in the Morning Sun, and...

Waldstein Castle, on the island of Growerth.

Growerth was a large island in the North Sea, under the jurisdiction of Germany.

Not only was it a prominently large island, it was also under development as a tourist destination. It was also actively establishing sister cities overseas in countries like Japan, America, and Australia.

Several cities were on the island, upon which were everything from streets resembling the Middle Ages to modern-day civic centers and hotels. Of course, there were no skyscrapers on the island—five-story hotels were about as tall as they went. And yet not a single room was vacant during the busy tourist season. Old buildings by the large streets that had been renovated into hotels were also quite popular with visitors.

Many small peaks rose up near the center of the island, covered with deciduous trees. And near the top of a peak on the southern side of the island was a large castle taken straight out of the Middle Ages.

Its majestic beauty harmoniously blended with the viridian forests and mountains. Countless tourists lost themselves in the wondrous sights as they stepped into the storybook setting.

But at the top of this fairytale castle was neither an elegant little bird awaiting the morning sun, nor a guard dedicated to serving his master. But rather, it was a red mass of liquid—the vampire to whom the castle belonged.

[Ah, the most stunning light of dawn! Yet I've been told that the clouds will grow thicker later this evening. So is this sight not akin to the tearful farewell of the gods who light *le soleil*?]

The rays of the morning sun were shining almost parallel to the ground. The vampire spread himself as wide as he could, taking in the beams of light.

And as a result, one of the castle's walls was painted red.

The wave of red spread at terrifying speeds, and pushed part of itself onto the castle rooftop to expertly weave together a series of letters.

[I recommend that you also take in the light, my dear friend! The sun will not last forever. After all, who can say if the beauteous sun will not explode by tomorrow morning?]

The boy laying on the rooftop looked at the letters of blood and sleepily rubbed his eyes.

"...But if the sun explodes, we're all going to die instantly." He said incredulously. But the red fluid changed form to respond.

[I fear I must correct you, Valdred. At their nearest, the sun and the Earth are 147,100,000 kilometers apart. And at their furthest, the distance grows to 152,100,000 kilometers. That

is an average of 149,600,000 kilometers. Even at the speed of light, you see, it takes eight minutes and nineteen seconds to traverse this distance. In other words, the sun that we look upon at this moment is an image of what it had been over eight minutes ago. Truly, a time machine that costs us nothing! Is it not a most romantic notion?]

The boy called Valdred read over the sentence, which had changed topics halfway through. He nodded.

The red liquid that the boy was speaking with was his master, and a slightly off-kilter vampire.

There was no 'main body' controlling the mass of blood. The blood itself was the vampire known as Gerhardt von Waldstein.

However, the mass of blood that ruled over this castle was once a very normal vampire.

Over the course of his research, in which he attempted to rid vampires of their weaknesses to sunlight, stakes, and other objects, he found himself taking on liquid form.

Because he derived nutrition from the special bacteria he infused with his own blood, Gerhardt required regular photosynthesis in order to live. He was almost the polar opposite of the quintessential vampire.

The boy who joined him in photosynthesis today was also a vampire who was quite far removed from the norm.

Not all vampires had a weakness to sunlight. Some turned to ash at the slightest touch of light, and others were entirely unfazed. But very few vampires so readily basked in the rays as this boy and the viscount did.

Even vampires who were unaffected by sunlight tended to prefer the shadows for fear of human discovery. If a vampire was standing in the sun, they either had a very specific purpose for doing so, or they were there by necessity—much like the viscount.

In Valdred's case, it was the latter.

Valdred Ivanhoe—Val for short—was a vampire who had once been a plant. To be specific, he was a watermelon vampire.

This was not a metaphor. Valdred *was* a watermelon, the fruit that many mistook for a vegetable. He had retained that form even after becoming a vampire.

[There, there. Toss such trivial concerns into the flames of oblivion. Should creatures such as ourselves be thrown into the sun's most searing flares, we would be burned to dust in a matter of moments. That is precisely the reason why we must accept the blessings of Mother Nature—the gift that fuels our very lives!]

Val stared at the viscount's words. His thoughts began to drift as he began to muse on his own existence.

'The blessings of Mother Nature, huh…'

To be more accurate, Valdred was himself a blessing of Mother Nature. But now he was wearing a false form, basking in the sunlight alongside the churning pool of blood that was now his lord.

Val's memories of his own birth were extremely vague.

'Beautiful…'

That was his first emotion, self-aware thought, and memory.

The thought that occurred to him in the span of a single second. A span of time in which he watched a rain of blood fall upon himself.

A single word. A single emotion. This was the origin of all that was himself. Yet at the same time, it was his final moment of life.

The moment the spray of blood touched him, the droplets stained his spherical body and seeped into his very cells as though possessed of a will. They bled into him and melded into his very being, and by the time he had come to his senses, he knew that he had become a different being entirely.

The second spray of red that touched him was the blood of a different vampire. He understood this because he had gained knowledge and the capacity to reason.

The rain of blood was a part of an experiment. Everything had been planned out meticulously.

All kinds of techniques were applied to forcibly induce a transformation of the soul. To become more animal, to become more human, to become more vampire.

The moment the watermelon had developed a sense of self, the researcher would undertake the process of 'education'.

It was the act of transcribing the souls of other vampires into the soul of the plant, using their blood as a medium.

Pieces of knowledge, character, memories, and trauma—carried by the shower of blood—seeped into the watermelon. Its newborn sense of self was crushed, torn, and mangled as it was painted over by the influx of souls.

But it was not the souls that had painted over his character.

It was an off-kilter awareness—as he was reconstituted by the shower of blood, the watermelon chose to paint over himself of his own free will. Valdred was given life, and at the same time he had been born anew.

The moment the researcher acknowledged that fact, the second shower of blood filled with soul was poured over him.

Yet another sense of self invaded the watermelon's psyche against his will, as though a self-aware guinea pig had no need to know anything.

The two souls in which characters and knowledge resided began to tangle together and fight amongst themselves—to overpower and devour the other and dominate. As a result, all that was left was a watermelon with a mangled sense of self born from the mixture of two souls.

Then, another soul.

Yet more blood.

Soul.

Blood.

Memories.

Knowledge.

Emotions.

Impulses.

Blood falling like a shower.

Soul splattering over himself.

But the watermelon could no longer consider the sight beautiful as he once did.

With each shower of blood, his self was broken.

With each shower his self was erased, and a new self was painted over it.

He was scared. Afraid. Terrified.

The self from a single second ago was no longer himself.

As he looked on in fear, he was covered in blood. And as he refused to fear, the overriding self was covered in blood and as he realized that he was indeed afraid the overriding self was covered in blood and as he thought of nothing the overriding self was covered in blood and as he lost himself to madness the overriding self was covered in blood and as he logically observed his own situation the overriding self was covered in blood—

The showers of blood came to an end.

Sitting there was not a watermelon, but a pitifully mutated guinea pig without a sense of self—a vampire with nothing but the knowledge needed to use its powers.

Several years passed. The watermelon who possessed the ability to draw illusions onto the retinas of others and construct the false image of a shapeshifter took on letters from the names of the vampires whose blood was contributed. The name ‘Valdred Ivanhoe’ was created.

At first glance, Valdred was a powerful vampire who could transform into anything.

But he—or she—or it—was afraid.

‘Do I really exist?’

‘I think, therefore I am,’ it was commonly said.

‘But is it really me who’s doing the thinking?’ Valdred wondered.

It was around the moment of this realization that Val began to refuse to reveal his true form as a watermelon to others. Despite the fact that it was undeniable proof of the existence of his true self, the watermelon could no longer trust even in this original body.

The self that had lived for a single second.

Was that truly an untainted sense of self?

Or perhaps it was the mumblings of the soul of another vampire that had been administered even earlier. And if that was the truth of the matter, perhaps there never was an original self that had been painted over with the souls of others.

What Valdred feared most was to lose by understanding.

If his only memory of his own self as a watermelon turned out to have been born from a copy of another soul, he would truly lose everything.

‘Then who in the world am I?’

Because he was afraid to lose that one self—the one sense of self that he could call his own—he did not approach the matter. He even attempted to hide that fact that he was a plant.

Then who was the Valdred Ivanhoe who existed where he stood? Whose sense of self lay within? Was it his own? Who could prove it, one way or another, when even he did not know the answer?

Afterwards, Valdred began to purposely create different personas and characters to match his illusory forms. And after a series of unusual events, he made his home here in Waldstein Castle.

The characters he played were all artificial. Fake. Of course, even the one character he was sure was genuine was nearly impossible to understand, seeing as that character’s only thought was, *‘Beautiful…’*.

Recently, Val caved to the preferences of the witches and female vampires of the castle and took on the form of a young boy. But ultimately, even that was a false form that had nothing to do with his own will.

He spent his days unable to sustain one constant self.

[Ah, to think it has already been a year since you came to call this castle home. How do you feel, Valdred? Have you come any closer to finding the answers you sought?]

The viscount's question rattled the boy. But Valdred neither ignored him nor got angry, instead sighing with a hint of embarrassment.

Technically, even his sigh was an illusion.

Valdred was acting as puppeteer to an illusionary body that contained a simple imitation of the respiratory system, using telekinetic power in just the right measure to produce just the right weight of movement.

In fact, Valdred had no need to respire like a human *or* take in energy like a plant(via photosynthesis). But the act of creating an illusion that incorporated such detailed human characteristics—even going so far as to expand and contract the illusion of lungs and expel air from the illusion of a mouth—was likely because Valdred had lived for much too long in the form of a human being.

Perhaps it was similar to the way the viscount added punctuation marks or exclamations to the words he formed with his own body.

"…I'm not sure. I haven't found an answer yet, but… I'm starting to think, little by little—maybe living forever might not be such a bad thing."

[Oh?]

"…I feel… strange, living in this castle. Everyone here accepts someone like me, as if it's the most natural thing in the world… I think."

As Val trailed off, the viscount confidently wove out a correction.

[There was no need for that final thought of yours, Valdred. Your acceptance is indeed most natural.]

"I see."

Val looked away from the viscount.

Because Gerhardt had no eyes as humans did, he perceived the world through his soul.

In other words, because Valdred's ability to draw illusions on retinas had no effect on the viscount, Gerhardt always saw Valdred's true form—something that the latter found extremely uncomfortable.

At first, he visibly avoided the viscount and made his fear apparent. But things changed recently as they began to converse more often.

Even so, Valdred always grew uncomfortable in their conversations. There was some sort of an unconscious sense of rejection that he eventually came to notice within himself. And with that understanding in mind, he quickly changed the subject.

"But it's unusual to see you taking in sunlight so early in the morning. I don't think I've ever seen you sunning when it's scheduled to rain soon."

[Ah, there is, in fact, an excellent reason for my unusual course of action today. Though you are indeed correct in observing that I prefer to wake in the afternoon while the sun beats

down at her fiercest, so that I may remain awake ‘til the dead of night. Today, however, is an exception. The Carnale Festival is scheduled to begin this evening, and I will also be entertaining some guests this afternoon. I thought to soak in more energy while I had the time today.]

The annual Carnale Festival lasted an entire week. Valdred enjoyed it last year as well, and it was the first time that he had seen so many people gathered on the island.

“Oh, I remember. It’s starting today, huh? But what’s this about guests?”

[Ah, some acquaintances of mine, you see…] The viscount said vaguely. Valdred stubbornly tried to pursue that line of thought.

It was neither unusual nor very common for the viscount to entertain visitors. Not only was he very well-connected with other vampires, he was also an official possessor of land and was on good terms with the locals. That was why vampires without a place to call home often came to him in search of a place in which to settle.

Valdred was reasonably certain that that was the case today, but he persisted in questioning the viscount in order to steer the discussion away from their earlier topic of conversation.

“What kind of people are they?”

[Ah, you see]

At that point, the viscount stopped very suddenly. The letters of blood collapsed as he began to form a new set of utterances.

[…No, this won’t do. We were discussing the matter of your future, were we not? We mustn’t allow our conversations to be so easily sidetracked, especially when they concern matters of such great importance.]

“Can we please just get sidetracked?”

[I must refuse, I’m afraid! It is the duty of a nobleman to take action on behalf of all distressed inhabitants of his land. Ah, perhaps you would accuse me of being a trifle too nosy. But is it not also right for a nobleman to be forgiven for such trifling transgressions?]

“I don’t see how this is going to help. It’s not like talking it out is going to help me find my true self.”

It was a rather cold response, but Valdred almost felt as though those words were also directed towards himself.

But the viscount’s words continued to seep into his thoughts.

[Ah, I take that to mean that you have at least made efforts to find the answer.]

“I… well…”

[If one sits idly by, one can neither change what can be changed nor learn what can be learned. Although I cannot condone the act of leaking negativity into the air without even making an attempt to change things for the better.]

“But Viscount Waldstein… this has nothing to do with you.”

Val tried to escape the conversation again. But the viscount’s argument grew stauncher.

[Ah, of course. You are also a vampire in your own right, with free will and all the responsibilities that come with it. It is indeed up to you to live as you will. But I must ask, in that case, that you pay me the rent that I have neglected to collect all this time.]

“Uh…”

A chill ran down Val’s spine.

He had been living in the castle as a freeloader since the previous year. He was even supplied with blood to drink from the local blood bank, free of charge.

“Th-then I’ll earn some money to pay it off. Would it be okay if I left after—”

[You are missing the point, Valdred!] The viscount wrote in bold letters. Val stopped himself without thinking.

[I intend neither to impose my own will upon your future nor to drive you from this castle. But if you are being plagued by thoughts of inferiority or self-hatred, I would like you to make an effort to change things, my friend.]

“…But I don’t even know where to start, or what to do.”

[Ah, yes. Then might I suggest that you begin by learning more about your own body?]

“Do you want me to go to a library, then? Or maybe to go see a doctor?”

Valdred was intending to be sarcastic, but the mass of blood wriggling in midair nodded.

[Of course! That is precisely what you should begin with.]

“Pardon?”

As Valdred stood in confusion, the viscount put up an utterance in bold letters.

[I shall introduce you to this castle’s very own Doctor and Professor!]

†

“…I never knew we had a place like this in the castle.” Val breathed, walking down a very long flight of stairs.

[Ah, it is a personal preference of Doctor’s, you see.]

“What kind of people are they, anyway?”

[Doctor and Professor are researchers who are in the process of studying methods to overcome death—in other words, methods to eliminate the weaknesses we vampires

possess. And in the process of their work, they have used all sorts of vampires as their guinea pigs. I've no doubt that their knowledge will be of use to you.]

"...Although I guess I shouldn't expect too much on the ethics side of things."

Although Val had lived in Waldstein Castle for over a year now, there were still many parts of it that he had yet to see. Because the aboveground area of the castle was unmistakably divided into the 'public area' and the 'living area', a one-time visitor would never in their wildest dreams notice that the castle housed numerous vampires. On that note, the pamphlets that introduced the layout of the castle to tourists kept visitors out of living areas with excuses like 'Entrance Restricted Due to Presence of Important Cultural Artifacts', 'Under Construction', or 'Staff Only'.

In a corner of the art supply storage room in the living area of the castle was an entrance to the castle underground.

Many large suits of armor were lined up in a row. The viscount came to a sudden stop before one in particular.

The armor was positively gigantic, standing nearly a full five meters high and impossible for human beings to wear. If these had been displayed in the public area, they would likely have become a mainstay of local tourism pamphlets.

The viscount twisted his form into a series of letters as he sloshed before the suit of armor. From Val's perspective, the letters were displayed backwards. He could not read them.

But when that code of sorts was reflected in a crystal inside the suit of armor, the latter began to move with a *thunk*.

The suit of armor then went silent, quietly opening up the wall behind itself to Valdred and the viscount.

There in the wall was a great, gaping hole and a latticed door that would not look out of place at the gates of hell.

[Let us be off, then. I must warn you that some sections of the passage are not illuminated. How is your night vision, Valdred?]

"Oh, um. Yes. It's good."

Valdred, still in the form of the little boy, stepped through the door after the viscount.

He glanced over at the armor, which towered over him without so much as a twitch.

Val was certain that he had seen this suit of armor somewhere before, and grasped at the threads of his memory. He finally recalled the event that took place last summer at this very castle.

One of the vampires had been inspired by a comic book of some sort to host a fighting tournament. This suit of armor was the 'robot' Val had seen fighting in the battles.

Although he frowned in disbelief at the thought, Val had no other way of explaining the strange creature. There did not seem to be any giant man in the suit of armor, nor did the pieces of armor seem to be haunted by a lost soul. What did the other vampires call this

creature? The words ‘Unit Toto’ came into mind, but he could not remember the rest very clearly.

As he and the viscount descended the steps, Val began to recall the events that had taken place on the day of the tournament.

‘If I remember right, they brought in everyone who lives on this island for the tournament.’

He had no idea how the event was thought up or organized, but the fighting tournament had indeed taken place. Besides him, other vampires, werewolves, and witches from the castle had participated. Most of them were unfamiliar to Val. He realized that, although he had already been living at Waldstein Castle for three months by that point, he had only interacted with a tiny fraction of his fellow inhabitants.

Ultimately, a scylla—a creature whose lower body was made of serpents—by the name of ‘Melina’ emerged victorious. The runner-up, Val recalled, was an ordinary human from the island by the name of ‘Traugott’.

He remembered that Melina mentioned an underground lake at the time. And now Val knew for certain that the lake existed, because he and the viscount were on their way there.

However, Valdred had no recollection of any ‘Doctor’ or ‘Professor’. They did not make an appearance even at the tournament, which every other vampire in the castle had attended.

Of course, Val had not seen them in the living area of the castle. He was reasonably certain that they were very deep underground. So he began to imagine the kind of people they might be.

Several minutes passed since they had begun their descent. The stone architecture around them came to an abrupt stop as it gave way to bare cliff faces all around them.

“Wow…” Valdred breathed, awed by the sight that unfolded before his eyes.

The sound of running water resounded through the space, larger than any man-made tunnel.

Stalactites hung from the ceiling, matched underneath them by many pointed stalagmites. All kinds of unique natural patterns were engraved on the walls, like the inside of a hollow tree.

Further into the cavern, calcified lime deposits stood in the shape of staircases. There were great pillars of stalactites and stalagmites clustered around, each pillar perhaps already hundreds of thousands of years old.

It was a cavern straight out of a tourist destination, but it was not on any informational guides handed out to visitors to the island.

[Ah, does this shock you, Valdred? This is a secret location for vampires, as well as the living area for those who love the underground and those whose circumstances prevent them from setting foot aboveground. I would love to open this wondrous, majestic cavern to the outside world, if only it were not an act of betrayal to the many who place their faith in me.]

At that point, Val realized that the viscount was as clearly visible now as he had been aboveground.

For some strange reason, the entire cavern was filled with soft light. It was brighter here than it was outside at dusk.

“…? I don’t see any lightbulbs…”

[Ah, yes. In my spare time, I thought to transplant some curious luminescent bacteria into the moss and water within these caverns. Of course, they were byproducts of my metamorphosis into this form.]

In the past, the viscount had incorporated a special type of bacteria into his own body in order to create energy. This luminescent bacteria was likely created in the process of the same research.

But thinking of the sheer number of bacteria that would be necessary to so brightly light up the cavern conjured up an unpleasant image in Valdred’s mind. He shuddered.

The cavern was indeed a beautiful place. But he had no desire to take up residence there.

His need for photosynthesis was one reason, but the more important factor was that he was not so drawn to this place that he would wish to be here.

And yet this ‘Doctor’ and ‘Professor’ were, supposedly, living here all this time like a pair of oddballs. Why in the world were they holed up so deep underground? Or was there another way in and out of the cavern, which they utilized to come and go as they pleased?

Val continued to wonder, but the viscount suddenly began to give an explanation of the space that lay at the end of the cavern.

[Growerth’s executions took place here in the distant past,.]

“…Pardon?”

[It is even equipped with Germany’s very own invention, the iron maiden. Yet despite its reputation in the world, it is neither a torture device intended to prevent the victim’s death, nor is it a device equipped with an escape mechanism. The iron maiden in our castle is an instrument of death, designed to kill in the blink of an eye.]

“…I see.”

Val read the viscount’s words and looked down solemnly. He had heard about the iron maiden in the past. It was a coffin made to resemble the form of a woman, its insides lined with countless spikes. As all one had to do was toss the victim inside and close it shut, the device guaranteed a simple yet grisly execution.

Had he obtained this knowledge himself, after his own birth? Or was that information from the memories of one of the vampires who had covered him in blood? Valdred could not remember. In fact, he did not even try.

“…Have you ever executed someone, Viscount Waldstein?”

[Ah, yes. I personally signed off the executions of no less than sixteen people. Of course, I elected to leave such power in the hands of the justice system in more recent times.]

“…You didn’t even hesitate to say that, huh.”

Val had thought that even the viscount would try to veer away from such a topic, but the older vampire had been all too quick to respond to his question.

[I would never have given my approval in the first place if I was ever intending to hide my responsibility. Those were not unjust sentences. I will maintain that I made the right decisions by signing their execution orders. And setting aside the criminals who were the subjects of the executions, to hesitate or attempt to cover up what happened in the past would be an insult to the laws and the people of the time. …Of course, it is not a past I am particularly proud of. I do not usually speak of it unless I am asked.]

Neither boasting nor regretful, the viscount recounted his past plainly—the past in which he had caused death, indirectly though it had been.

[The death penalty has been repealed in this country, but it is no business of mine to say whether that is right or wrong. At least, it is no business for a vampire to be poking his nose into.]

“I see…”

[In fact, I am doubtful that such a matter could be so clearly given a black-or-white answer. Although it would be splendid if every conflict could be resolved with words, there are—to give us the benefit of the doubt—times and circumstances when things we consider unjust can indeed be justified.]

Was Val imagining things? The letters forming the viscount’s words looked thinner than usual. Although Valdred had no way of knowing about the kind of things that had taken place in the viscount’s past, the latter’s current character made it clear that he had lived through a great many times and ages.

‘Compared to all that, I’m just…’

Val again fell into thought, into a labyrinth of questioning where he wandered to seek the reason for his own existence.

But at that moment, they turned a corner and came face-to-face with one perfectly completed scene.

She was there before their eyes.

That was all.

This was a place of execution.

The iron maiden was not the only occupant of the space. Even guillotines used by the Nazi regime were installed here.

But even that was just a part of the wondrous scene unfolding before them.

She was silently blooming in the midst of faintly glowing stalactites, like a sprout budding inside a tree.

There was a gigantic flower laid open there, atop which was a nude, pale-skinned girl.

Was she asleep, or dead? She was buried in the center of the gigantic flower, sitting still as a statue.

The petals were wrapped up around the girl, and the flower was circled by dark green thorns that were woven like a net. Leaves and vines were spread in a circle all around her like cake decorations.

The vines extended in every direction, wrapping around the stalactites and stalagmites. It almost looked like they were a very part of the caverns.

The faintly-glowing hollow resembled a cocoon embracing the great flower.

And the vampire watermelon who had lived among humans gaped in awe at the sight of his fellow plant.

Was it the scene itself he thought beautiful, or was it the girl?

Unable to make a decision, Val uttered a single word.

A quiet murmur was all he could muster.

Whether he intended it or not, it was an emotion identical to one he had experienced at the moment of his birth.

“...Beautiful...”



†

At the same time, the harbor in southern Growerth.

The morning sun had risen completely. A lone vampire was in the light, standing atop the harbor office.

She was Shizune Kijima, an Eater-turned-vampire.

The ferry from mainland Germany had just docked. Visitors of all sorts were disembarking, each with their own thoughts and intentions.

There were more tourists coming in than usual. It was likely because the Carnale Festival was scheduled to begin that night.

There was a young couple, probably on their honeymoon from the looks of their excessive displays of affection.

There was a middle-aged man wearing a very somber expression, looking as though he were ready to commit suicide.

There was a young woman in a gothic outfit leaning against a large piece of cargo that had been unloaded from the freight hold.

There were a dozen or so children clustered together, likely on a school trip of some sort.

There were all sorts of distinctive people, but Shizune did not feel the presence of any vampires among the visitors.

“Too bad.”

Though she was once the hunter, she had become the hunted. But her hatred of vampires had only grown deeper since the transformation. It was because she had become the thing she wanted to destroy most. She had been turned by a vampire—the very same one who had taught her the way of the Eater many years ago.

Although the one who turned her had been manipulating her to further his own ends, Shizune did the same to him as she used him for her own goals. At least, that was the plan. All the pieces had been in place, but things had gone horribly wrong.

‘I will destroy everything you’ve worked so hard to build up.’

At first, Shizune considered massacring the population of the island in a show of rage. But she quickly calmed down and stopped herself.

But she was not stopped by her conscience. What stopped her was the idea of becoming an enemy of the viscount or the police.

Because she had only recently become a vampire, she still did not have complete control over her own powers. Shizune came to the conclusion that making enemies in such a state would only serve to worsen her situation.

Of course, once she had sufficient power, she would destroy them all—humans and vampires. She was even considering taking her own life at the end of the slaughter.

It was only a matter of having sufficient power.

And it seemed that yet another obstacle in her quest for power was to appear that day.

"…I thought I'd eaten every last bit of you. Maybe I lost one while I was distracted."

Melhilm Herzog.

He was the vampire whom Shizune had devoured, and whose powers she had transferred to her then-ally Watt.

Ordinarily, a vampire could not gain the powers of another by drinking the target's blood. But there was one exception: if a vampire drank the blood of an Eater who had just eaten a target vampire, the powers of the target would be transferred to the former. In other words, Eaters acted as filters that allowed vampires to gain the powers of their brethren.

Melhilm, who was thus indirectly eaten by Watt, had taken the trouble to send a handwritten letter announcing his own survival.

If he intended to avenge himself, there would have been no need to do such a thing. Melhilm's motives were still a mystery, but Shizune was unfazed.

'I don't care what he's after. I just have to take him down directly.'

Shizune was not being overconfident. She came to this conclusion on the basis of her carefully-thought out analysis.

That was why she was cautiously observing the flow of visitors to the island at the harbor, which was the only way in or out of Growerth. She did not think Melhilm was so foolish as to be discovered there—he could very well fly to the island as a flock of bats, and there were other places further along the island where ships could reasonably dock.

But Shizune chose to wait at the harbor.

After all, Melhilm was also searching for her. Perhaps he would go after Watt first, but that did not matter to Shizune. Although she did want to eventually take care of Watt herself, her first priority was to save herself from the trouble coming her way.

'Besides, Watt won't die so easily.'

The mayor had transformed his only weakness—his heart—into a single bat and hidden it somewhere. If Shizune made one wrong move, he could strike back with ease.

Things would be little different if Melhilm decided to target Watt. In fact, Shizune would be happy if the former could find the hidden heart and spare her the trouble.

"…!"

Her senses jolted her awake from her reverie.

‘I can feel it.’

It was a vampire’s presence.

One ability of Eaters was the power to sense the presence of vampires. Even though she had been turned, that ability alone remained with Shizune.

But the presence had come from behind her.

And it was familiar to her.

It was the presence of the vampire she had driven into a corner, spiced with fear, and devoured entirely—or so she had thought.

But it seemed that she had not, in fact, eaten all of him. Shizune amended her own memories as she slowly turned.

The vampire stood in the sunlight, looking at Shizune with a confident smile.

He had long blond hair and wore a long violet coat. Under his sharp eyes and nose were a pair of conspicuously glinting fangs.

There was a ten-meter gap between Shizune and the vampire. Although the former stood at the edge of the rooftop, the man—Melhilm Herzog—stood at the very center, as though he were reigning over the space.

“…It’s been a long time, you monster.”

Perhaps he was being considerate to Shizune. Melhilm spoke to her in fluent Japanese.

“Never thought I’d see the day when a vampire called *me* a monster. But it’s not a bad feeling.” Shizune replied coldly. Even though she had been surprised by him, and even though he had been detected by her, both Shizune and Melhilm looked unperturbed.

“You’re making no sense. You’re now a vampire yourself. I suppose we could say we’re finally on even footing. After all, the last time we met, you were a mere Eater—a lower life form.”

“And who was it that screamed like a little girl when that ‘lower life form’ gobbled him up?”

“Even humans are eaten by beasts on occasion.”

Although their respective words were quite casual, the looks in their eyes were growing more and more hostile.

“Oh, I see. So did you end up lugging a shotgun along today to kill that animal?” Shizune taunted, reaching into her jacket. She was armed with her weapons of choice—modified utensils like knives and forks—and was ready to throw them in a moment’s notice.

but Melhilm did not even twitch, mechanically continuing the conversation.

“Not at all. I’m too much of a coward, you see. The idea of hunting beasts with my own two hands is quite terrifying.”

“...?”

“And that is why I elected to leave the hunting to the hounds.”

Melhilm finished his sentence with a disturbing grin—a grin so strangely confident that Shizune hesitated for a single moment. And just as she went over the meaning of his words, she felt a chill run down her spine.

Her body was moving before her mind had processed the information.

She leapt forward and looked back. A streak of silver was whipping across the place she had been standing at only a moment earlier.

“...!”

“Oh, I missed. This is unfortunate.”

The girl was high in the air.

But she was not floating. Perhaps she had scaled the wall of the three-story building in an instant, or perhaps she had leapt up to the rooftop in a single bound. Either way, the young woman began her descent from a point slightly higher than the rooftop and landed on its edge.

It was clear that she had leapt up from the ground. After all, the young woman in gothic clothing was the very one Shizune saw on the ground by the cargo only moments ago.

As she registered the appearance and voice of her attacker, Shizune also saw the weapon the young woman was wielding.

“Is that... a silver whip?”

Sunlight shone along the glinting cord as it coiled like a serpent and returned to the young woman, cutting through the air. The metallic sound of the whip grazing the rooftop, and the glint Shizune remembered from her own days as a Hunter convinced her that her suspicions were correct.

There was a cone-shaped lump of silver at the end of the whip, looking much like the tip of a small spear.

The whip itself was likely made of leather or a similar material, then coated with silver. Although it probably was not pure, it would still be extremely heavy.

But the young woman wielded it without exerting an ounce of effort.

And what bothered Shizune more than anything was the fact that she could not sense a vampire’s presence from the newcomer.

“You... you’re an Eater.”

“Yes. I am.”

The Eater grinned and lightly waved the hand that was holding the whip.



At the same time, Shizune vaulted backwards.

The whip slithered toward her as she fell back. Its silver tip tore at her arm.

‘Ow…’

Although she did not let out a cry, a kind of pain she had never experienced in her life ran down her spine. She was immune to sunlight, but Shizune had no resistance to silver.

‘I see… So this is what it feels like to be hit with silver…’

Because she had never been targeted by Hunters or Eaters in the past, this was an entirely new experience for Shizune. In fact, this was the first time she met an Eater other than herself. Analyzing her opponent’s strategy was difficult when she had zero experience dealing with an enemy of this type.

More disheartening for Shizune was the fact that, from only the looks of the Eater’s jump and whipping, the newcomer was likely physically stronger than herself.

To say that it was a shock was an understatement.

Shizune had also devoured dozens upon dozens of vampires in the past, taking on their powers for herself.

But it was clear that this Eater had eaten many more—or perhaps stronger—vampires than herself. Although Shizune wanted to deny the reality before her, the pain that clawed at her very nerves did not lie.

“What… is your name?” Shizune asked, drawing a fork-shaped dagger and taking a stance.

The young woman smiled brightly and bent the trajectory of the whip.

“Theresia. Theresia Riefenstahl.”

As Theresia introduced herself, the whip flew back toward her. It would soon return to Shizune with the force of a powerful bullet, but Shizune was neither foolish nor belligerent enough to let that single moment pass by.

She quickly glanced at Melhilm. He was watching with his hands behind his back, not looking likely to make a move.

So Shizune, at that moment, focused all of her attention at her target—Theresia.

But the moment she lobbed her forks at her foe, her legs were suddenly caught by something.

“?!”

She lost her balance. the forks flew off in the wrong direction at full force. They disappeared into the distance like bullets.

Although Shizune had narrowly avoided falling over, her legs still would not move.

As she stood there in shock, Melhilm, who stood beside her, spread open his arms from their position behind him.

“...!”

Shizune finally realized why her legs would not move.

Melhilm’s arms were cut off at the elbows.

“I never had the chance to show you last time, but this is one application of my power.”

Shizune finally looked down at her feet. A pair of hands were clutching her ankles. The arms they were attached to were cut off at the elbows, but eerily enough, the ends were made of countless tiny bats swarming together. It was as though the bats were contorting themselves into the form of an arm.

“I’ve left the hunting to the hound, but I thought it might be prudent to at least set up a trap for my prey.” Melhilm said, certain of his victory. But his words did not reach Shizune.

Her senses were focused entirely on the silvery line of death heading her way.

As Shizune stood with no way to escape, Theresia attacked without a shred of doubt or remorse.

A splatter of blood spread under the blue sky.



3章 博士と教授は地底にこもり？

Chapter 3: Doctor and Professor Hole up Underground, and...

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The execution grounds.

There could be nothing more out of place there than her very presence.

"...Oh! Hello, Viscount Waldstein."

The silhouette at the center of the scene gave them a mature smile.

Stretching in the center of the sprawling flower was a girl with smooth porcelain skin.

Although she was wearing nothing, she did not seem to care very much about her own nudity.

[I understand that my visit was quite unexpected, but might I humbly request that you clothe yourself, Selim?] The viscount asked, his words formed at a slight angle from the girl. He was turning his senses away from her.

'My goodness. It's not as though he's obligated to look away. The viscount can be too stubborn sometimes.' Val thought, having taken on the form and character of a woman. She was looking directly at the girl in the flower.

"Oh, yes!"

The girl with the gentle smile squirmed into the gigantic flower, which looked like it had been taken straight out of a theme park. The vines that were sprawled out around her folded into the little chamber created by the flower petals. At the ends of the vines hung things like clothing, undergarments, and a pair of glasses.

The objects were seemingly sucked into the flower where the girl was. And only a moment later, the vines withdrew without the objects they had been holding, crawling back up the walls of the cavern and stopping still.

"One, two... one, two..."

A childlike voice squeaked from inside the petals. Soon, the flower opened up once more to reveal the girl, this time dressed fully and wearing a pair of glasses over her eyes.

"Good morning, Viscount Waldstein." She said, bowing slowly. Her languid but fluid movements were very much like the twisting of a mimosa, or the sight of a plant sprouting in fast motion.

[Ah, I see that I may finally behold your presence in all propriety. And let me apologize for being so late to greet you. You look most lovely, as always.]

"Ahaha. You're embarrassing me, sir." The girl laughed sweetly, fixing her glasses before they fell. She then noticed the presence of Valdred, who was in the form of a woman in a black dress.

Shock spread over the girl's face as she hurriedly looked around. She quickly pulled one of her petals close and hid behind it, stuttering nervously.

"I, um… I-I'm sorry! I had no idea we had a guest…"

"Oh!"

The girl trembled and bowed at Val with eyes like a newborn animal's. She moved like a rusted machine, stumbling awkwardly in a total 180 from her poise when she earlier greeted the viscount.

[Ah, Selim. I do believe that you and Valdred have met in the past…] said the viscount. Selim tilted her head in confusion. The name seemed to be familiar to her, but it did not match what she remembered of the person with that name.

"Oh my, I'm sorry. I was in a different form the last time we met…" The woman in the black dress said, and transformed her body as though in a flash of CGI. Her shape, color, and physical texture made a smooth transition into a new form, bringing forth the appearance of an innocent-looking boy standing in front of the wall.

"Oh! I… um… I'm so sorry!" Selim apologized for no apparent reason. Val awkwardly held up his hands.

Selim Vergès was a rather unusual vampire.

She was originally a plant, much like Valdred, and the human form she took on was but a small part of her entire body.

From the girl's ankles down, she was connected to the center of a large flower. When she had a need to move around, she moved her roots and vines in order to propel the entire flower from one place to another.

Although a part of her body was nothing short of being a lovely young girl, that part could not be detached from the rest, forcing Selim to live underground in the company of tools of death. Including the great flower under her, she was more of an eye-catching sight than most other vampires.

The one time they encountered one another, Val and Selim had not had a chance to speak. But Valdred had a great deal of interest in his fellow plant-vampire.

However, in the aftermath of their previous encounter, he had been unable to figure out where she was residing. He was also too embarrassed to ask anyone where he could find her, leaving time to pass with nothing happening between them.

But now that she was right before his eyes, Val could not think of anything to say.

The fact that they were similar in nature did not necessarily mean that their struggles were also alike. Perhaps Selim was proud of her nature as a plant. Perhaps Val, created from the mixture of many souls, was fundamentally different even from her. Perhaps Selim had slowly built up her own identity, like humans did. In that case, she would be possessed of a clear sense of self.

What should he say to this girl he knew nothing about, Val wondered. Nothing came to mind.

“Um…”

[We are here to speak to Doctor and Professor. Are they currently in the laboratory?] The viscount said before Val could begin. But Gerhardt’s question reminded Val why they were there in the first place.

In contrast to Val’s silence, Selim once more regained her smile and voice.

“Yes. they’re both inside.” She beamed, and pointed at a corner of the cavern.

The great flower underneath her slowly began to curl inward, and the vines and roots below began to wrap around her lower body as though to protect her.

The flower was now about half the size of a human, covering the girl’s lower body. It looked rather like a fancy skirt that people wore as part of a costume for a play.

Her lower body stood in total contrast to her childlike face. The vines wrapped around it began to squirm as the girl began advancing through the cave, sliding as though on a moving walkway.

Although Val was taken aback at the sight, he quietly followed after her.

[I apologize, Valdred. Selim is quite wary of strangers, you see. She is always fearful before those she is unfamiliar with, but allow me to assure you that she is a gentle soul possessed of an iron will.] The viscount said, floating between Val and Selim. Reading the viscount’s explanation, Val thought for a moment that the viscount’s body was very convenient for holding secret conversations.

‘Scared of strangers, huh? That reminds me of how I freaked out when Michael saw my true form last year.’

Remembering the human boy who promised to forget his true form, Valdred silently followed Selim and the viscount.

The beautiful natural cavern soon gave way to a clearly artificial corridor. The execution grounds that Selim had been nesting in seemed to be the center of the caverns, but this place was likely built further inside the earth. Although there was no flooring covering the ground, the path was even and lit by lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling.

They walked down the hall for several minutes.

“Whoa…” Val breathed, looking at the object that was standing before him.

The rock faces around them had suddenly given way to a wall of concrete.

There was an office-like door in the center of the wall. From the looks of the electronic lock installed in it, the door would not have been out of place in a modern apartment building.

Val was almost underwhelmed at having come into the cavernous basement of a medieval castle only to find a modern structure inhabiting its depths.

“Doctor? Professor? The viscount is here to see you.” Selim said, pressing a button on the intercom beside the door.

<Ah, yes. Do come in.>

A voice came from the intercom. There was a *click*. The sound of the door unlocking.

“...Huh?”

Something about the voice bothered Val greatly, but he convinced himself that he was hearing things and followed Selim and the viscount through the door.

He then realized that he had not heard wrong.

“Hm… And what brings you here, Viscount Waldstein? Hoh hoh. I see you continue to enjoy your fluid and nearly-immortal body, as usual.”

[Not without some complaint, I fear. Only last year, I found myself frozen and locked inside a coffin—I very nearly passed from this world!]

“Of course, of course. I happened to observe the incident myself. Why, I considered lending you a hand, but it’s certainly a relief to see that you managed to take control of the situation without my assistance.”

[I am glad to see that you are as uninterested in the world as ever, Doctor.]

Doctor and the viscount traded jibes in good humor, but the former soon took notice of Valdred, who stood stiffly by himself.

“And this young man would be… now, who were you again? Terribly sorry—my memory isn’t what it used to be, I’m afraid.”

[I believe this would be your first meeting with Valdred, Doctor.]

“Ah! Of course! Young Valdred. Dear me, I’d completely forgotten. I’m very sorry, young man.”

“He said this was our first meeting…” Val trailed off, but that was not the point he really wanted to make.

Doctor’s manner of speech was almost comically exaggerated to convey the image of an elderly man. But the voice that articulated his words could not have been more dissonant. The nagging feeling from the intercom once more came over Val.

It was not that Doctor’s voice was not pleasing to the ears. In fact, his voice was exceedingly clear and beautiful.

And though it did not match his manner of speech, it was a perfect fit for his appearance.

The ‘Doctor’ that greeted Val and the others at the door was a young man. A boy.

At that moment, Val thought to himself—the term ‘pretty-boy’ probably existed to describe this boy.

It was a different kind of beauty from that of Selim in the execution grounds. Her beauty came from her harmonious unity with nature.

Doctor, on the other hand, was possessed of something more resembling artificial, geometric elegance.

He had shimmery silver hair like a mirror, and beautiful eyes that glinted like crystals. His irises were a light silver, juxtaposed against the pitch-black pupils within. His very eyes were already a work of art.

His nose, ears, the shape of his lips, and the pale skin peeking from under the sleeves of his lab coat were no different.

However, there was nothing resembling ‘future potential’ in the boy’s appearance—the potential that every child possessed, hinting at their eventual growth and maturation. From that, Val surmised that the boy’s appearance—early teens at the very most—was likely already complete. He also determined that, should this boy ever grow into adulthood, he would likely be able to bend every woman on the island to his will.

But the beautiful boy used the kind of language expected from someone much older than he appeared. It was extremely unnatural to behold, but there was only one reasonable explanation for his choice of tone.

But this was no time to be asking questions to confirm such suspicions, Val thought, and stepped into the laboratory.

The facility, built deep inside the caverns, was quite modern. It was full of technology, and the unnecessarily pristine walls and ceilings bore down upon the minds of all who walked through the hallways.

‘This is awkward. Never thought I’d find a place like this under the castle.’

When the viscount first mentioned a doctor, Val had imagined the chamber of an alchemist from the Middle Ages, brewing purple liquid in a cauldron while adding lizard tails or mosquito eyeballs to the mixture.

But he was faced with the essence of modern science and technology. Surprised at his guess being so far off the mark, Valdred walked through the door without complaint.

‘That’s right. Who’d use a cauldron in this day and age, anyway? Even the witches at the castle use… test… tubes…?’

In front of the computer inside the room was a gigantic cauldron, a mysterious purple brew boiling inside.

Val almost lost his balance.

‘I should have known. This guy’s a friend of the viscount.’

He pressed down on his temples with an incredulous expression, when Doctor suddenly turned with a raised eyebrow.

“Young man, does the presence of this cauldron bother you? Why, I’ll have you know that some things never change, despite the passing of the ages. Researching a relic of the past—an unchanged essence of power—with modern technology should be nothing deserving shock. After all, the form, material, and mass of a witch’s cauldron is imperative for the creation and use of certain kinds of magical powers.”

“Oh… uh, I’m sorry.”

Val hung his head, having been read like a book. But Doctor chuckled and placed a hand on the edge of the steaming cauldron.

“*This* cauldron, however, is a simple humidifier.”

“Wait! No way! What? …There’s a power cord on this cauldron! And the steam is cold!”

“That is because this is an ultrasonic humidifier. Keeps the room quite cool, don’t you agree?”

“This purple stuff is just silicone! And there’s even bubbles in here to make it look like it’s boiling!” Val cried, examining the cauldron. He felt no heat from it. “What kind of a scientist puts a humidifier right in front of a computer?”

“A healthy work environment and a pleasing atmosphere outweighs the need for a computer in tip-top shape. And young man, I am not a scientist. ‘Doctor’ is merely a nickname, for I am a simple researcher… or an investigator, you could say.”

“Well, you’ve created an atmosphere all right. And what kind of a vampire cares about his *health*?!” Val found himself raising his voice. Doctor’s childlike features twisted into a grin.

“Ah… Viscount, this young man is more insolent than I gave him credit for.”

[Haha! Is it not most pleasant? Ah, from his current tone and hot-blooded character, I presume that Valdred is currently in the form of a young boy.]

“…!”

Val deflated instantly. Because his form was always constant to the viscount’s senses, the latter had to determine the kind of form he took on by listening to his voice and observing his character.

“Please… don’t.” Val said, his head still bowed.

[Ah, if this matter bothers you, Valdred, then I shall speak no more of it.] The viscount responded. [But was our visit to Doctor not for the precise purpose of asking his assistance in the matter?]

“Yeah, but…”

With some difficulty, Val reminded himself why he was here. In order to find out more about himself, he would speak with Doctor and—

‘Wait a second.’

“Wasn’t there someone else? A professor or something?”

At that moment, they heard voices from a door on the other side of the room.

And as soon the door opened, the voices filled Valdred’s ears.

“...C’mon. We’re just asking for money.”

“Think about how much we suffered for your experiments, you know?”

“We demand fair compensation!”

“We’re not asking for wages here. Just your gratitude. Which we will not accept in any form other than cash! That is the hope that lies in capitalism!”

“Let’s be frank here. We want money! Hand it over now!”

“E-U-R-O-S! E-U-R-O-S!”

Val breathed a sigh of relief at the appearance of the familiar voices and their chatter.

The newcomers were a group of five or six vampires in casual clothing. They were once Watt’s henchmen, but they had turned against him after falling head-over-heels for the maids of Waldstein Castle. But having also turned against Watt, Valdred was in no position to criticize their actions.

Strangely enough, a good chunk of these former henchmen of Watt were quite interested in Japanese games and animation. They were also very human in behavior, almost to the point of exaggeration.

But Valdred’s moment of relief was quickly shattered and thrown into utter confusion by the ‘thing’ that the vampires were surrounding.

<Eek! Everyone! Please calm down!>

‘It’ was speaking in the kind of voice most suited to a female anime character—a magical girl, or a kitten, perhaps—that one might see in anime or video games.

But Val could not even determine where ‘its’ voice was coming from.

‘It’ was a white, two-meter tall coffin.

The owner of the sweet animesque voice.

Unlike most coffins, this particular casket was standing on its narrow end, which was equipped with caterpillar tracks.

To add, a pair of robotic arms were sticking out of the back of the coffin. The arms were inside the sleeves of a very large lab coat.

“...Huh?!”

[Ah, Professor! I was beginning to wonder where you had gone. Entertaining some company, I see!]

“Whaaaat?!”

The viscount went on the plainly greet the coffin, adding fuel to the flames of Val’s confusion.

[Your soul glows a most beautiful color as usual, Professor. I suspect that things have changed little since my last visit here.]

<Eep! Flattery will get you nowhere, Viscount Waldstein.>

Val silently watched the scene unfolding before him. The vampires, who had noticed the viscount’s presence, crowded around him.

“Hey, it’s Val and the viscount.”

“Viscount aside, I never thought I’d see you here, Val.”

“Oh! I bet the witches upstairs were giving you a hard time, am I right?”

“Sexual abuse, I bet.”

“And now you want to sue them.”

“Heh. This is all because you haven’t transformed into a maid for us! But it’s not too late, Valdred! Hurry, become one with the green!”

“Make her stacked, please.” “No way! Flat chests all the way!” “What are you, a pedo?!” “Don’t be an idiot! I like *grown women* with flat chests!” “Shut up.” “Then how about we ask for one flat side and one bouncy side?” “That’s an Amazon!” “Heh. They say that the Amazons chopped off their right breasts in order to make archery easier. I know. I understand this!” “Who cares about warriors? I’m asking for a maid!” “Or how about a *warrior* maid?” “Whoa, what kind of a psycho maid are you asking for?”

As the vampires began to go off on one tangent after another, the gigantic coffin once again called out in a cutesy voice, surprising Selim.

<Eek! Miss Selim! Please get these perverts out of here!>

“Oh? Oh! Yes, Professor!”

Selim blinked for a moment at the sudden request, but she soon extended several vines from her lower body and began to restrain the chattering vampires.

“Gah! She got me?!”

“If you think about it, the fact that you’re tangled up with a girl’s body sounds pretty ouch ouch ouch okay okay sorry please don’t squeeze that hard uncle uncle uncle!”

“Damn you, Doctor! Professor! You’re not going to get away with this!”

“Viscount! Save us!”

[Hah hah. Have patience, my dear friends. I shall add an extra bottle of milk to each of your dinners from this day forth. What do you say?]

“That’s… no better than paying us *peanut*s!”

“I demand cash, Doctor! Cash!”

“We’re going on strike, you hear me?!”

“Our struggle has only just begun!”

Doctor watched as the vampires were slowly being restrained.

“Capitalism is but a dictatorship that serves money as its king. Am I wrong?”

“…?! Wait! That was such a cool line I almost fell for it!”

“Even communist regimes give people pay, you idiot!”

“You’re not fooling us, kid!”

The look on Doctor’s face reacted to the final remark.

“I’m too old to be called a child by the likes of you *infants*!”

“Whoa?!”

“Ha… So you thought that I bore the appearance of my true age, young vampires?”

‘Right…’

Val, finally back to a state where he could think, turned his thoughts to the handsome young boy before him. He set aside the talking coffin for the moment.

‘He must have been turned when he was a child. And he never aged since then.’

Vampires who were born to vampire parents generally aged to the peak of their adulthood, somewhere between their twenties to their forties, at which point their aging halted almost completely. Depending on the bloodline, many such vampires could live on for centuries without growing old.

However, vampires who were once human before being turned were different. Their maturation and aging processes froze at the moment of their turning. Although changes in things like muscle mass or fat deposits could still occur, any form of maturation or aging, such as the growing of permanent teeth in place of baby teeth, would no longer occur.

There were, of course, some exceptions. But this particular vampire known by the nickname of ‘Doctor’ was undoubtedly one of the latter. A vampire turned at a young age, never allowed to mature from that point onwards.

“Youngsters these days… No respect for the elderly.”

“Ugh…”

The vampires, overwhelmed by Doctor’s show of authority, paled and went silent.

And so Doctor revealed his true age to his audience.

“As of this year, I am twenty-seven years old, you rapscallions!”

There was silence.

The vampires that Selim had tied up exchanged glances, looking around incredulously. But soon, their shock gave way to outrage.

“Twenty-seven… Which means you’re *younger than me*, you little bastard!”

“Shit! Don’t scare us like that!”

“What kind of a twenty-something acts like an old man, anyway?!”

“You’re taking ‘precocious’ way too far!”

“What are you, a wannabe tweenager?!”

“A tweeniebopper?!”

As the vampires raised their voices, spit flying everywhere, Doctor chuckled like an enlightened man and turned to Selim.

“Show these youngsters out, would you, Selim?”

“Oh! Yes!”

Selim smiled brightly, apologized to the vampires with an entirely different expression, and left through the door.

Unwillingly following after her, the vampires floated behind like helium balloons in the hands of a child. Valdred watched the cartoonish scene unfold before him, but the moment the door closed shut, he remembered that he was also a player in the story, not an audience member.

He had forgotten his purpose for coming several times over by now, but seeing everyone go off on different tangents made him more inclined to take an observer’s seat than anything else.

Once he regained his calm, he would probably be able to take a more objective view of his own situation.

But stopping his thought processes from proceeding any further in that direction was the presence of the coffin-robot, which stood right in the middle of his field of vision.

“…Um… Viscount Waldstein? What in the world…”

[Ah, my apologies for the delayed introduction. This kind soul here is Professor. Professor, meet Valdred. He seems to be curious as to his own nature, so I thought it best to bring him to the two of you for consultation.]

‘Wait, what? No. Viscount Waldstein, please don’t introduce me to weird people(?) like them without even asking me first. Please.’ Valdred thought.

<Oh, I see! I *thought* it was strange that you came to see us. Not many people come to visit us without getting referred here.>

‘But I didn’t even—’

“Hmph. I am quite interested in learning more about this young man.”

‘Damn it!’

Sensing something strangely resembling despair at Doctor’s comment, the boy decided to let the situation unfold before his eyes. But before that, there was one thing he wished to confirm.

“Um… Professor? Why a coffin? You… *are* inside it, right?”

<Eep! What a personal question… And we’ve only just met!>

‘Uh. What do I do now?’

<But you know, if you really insist, I don’t mind opening up for you!>

The joints on the top of the caterpillar tracks spun back and forth. The entire coffin pivoted around it. Val desperately wanted to ignore the outlandish image, but he found himself even more curious than before about the contents of the coffin.

“…If it doesn’t make you uncomfortable, then please let me see.”

Val hesitantly stepped closer. He pulled off the lab coat from the coffin’s arms and opened the lid.

It flipped open with surprisingly little resistance. Val looked inside.

“…”

He slowly closed the lid.

Inside the coffin was a set of human bones, lying completely still. The moment Val opened the lid, the caterpillar tracks and the robotic arms on the coffin ceased functioning. They remained stationary, just like the bones inside. But as soon as he closed the lid again, the coffin’s unusual voice returned to the room as though nothing had happened.

<Eep! I'm so embarrassed.>

"Um…"

<No! Please don't say a word! You shouldn't expose a lady's secrets!>

"Right…"

'Let's not think about it.'

Val set aside his curiosity about the coffin for a moment and turned to Doctor.

"Um… Doctor? What kind of a relationship do you have with Professor?" He asked, trying to change the topic at hand.

Doctor glanced up at the ceiling with a bittersweet look.

"…Do you know the answer to Fermat's Last Theorem?"

"Huh? N-no…"

"That is precisely the relationship between Professor and myself."

"That's not an answer! That wasn't even subtle!" Val cried without even thinking. Doctor turned to him with a very gentle look.

"Ah, to be young again. You will understand one day. Once you've become an adult."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who looks like a kid! So what is it, are you together or what? I just want a 'yes' or 'no'."

"Young man, are you aware that you sound much like a Japanese businessman from the time of Japan's bubble economy? Now, let me begin by defining 'yes' by analyzing the three letters that compose it. 'Y' is—"

"…I'm sorry. Never mind."

'These people. Are. Weird. They're the weirdest acquaintances of the viscount I've ever seen, and that's saying something. And that coffin—is she even a vampire to begin with?'

[Ah, what might be the matter, Valdred? I see that your soul is currently in a very stable state.]

"Hoh hoh. I see your blood has cooled somewhat."

<Just like a young master coming out of meditation and fasting!>

"…I'm going back upstairs."

Though three sets of expressions were fixed upon his face, Val turned to leave.

'That's right. I'll talk to that girl—Selim—on the way back. That'll be a lot more productive.' He thought, and took hold of the doorknob. But the voice that reached him at that very moment put a complete stop to his newly-made plans.

“Since time immemorial, watermelons have been relatively susceptible to being turned into vampires. That is probably the reason for your current existence.”

“...!”

His feet stopped in their tracks.

The hand holding the doorknob would not move. Although it was only a combination of illusion and telekinesis, Val had accustomed himself to moving as a human would. That was why his perceived movements betrayed the state of his psyche.

“...Did the viscount tell you about me?”

Badly rattled by Doctor’s comment, Valdred thought to himself that if he had a heart, then it would now be beating loud enough for the entire room to hear.

But Doctor continued quietly, pushing Val further into a corner.

“Not at all. I was told by no one, but I *did* keep tabs on you. This is the first time I’ve seen you in the form of a boy, but the security cameras I installed show you as nothing more or less than what you are without the assistance of your illusions.”

“...!”

Val reflexively turned towards Doctor with a look part sadness, part anxiety, and part anger.

“Professor and I are always watching, you see, from this laboratory. We observe the many different vampires who live in this castle.”

Doctor, quite happy to have seen Valdred change his expression this way, took a seat at a computer chair.

“As I told you at the very outset of this meeting, I had ‘forgotten’ you. Or, to be more specific, I failed to recognize you. After all, this is my first time observing you in the form of a human being.”

Val could not find a way to answer. Doctor put on a very gentle look and picked up a pen from beside him.

“Now, then. Shall we begin with a physical examination?”

†

Sometime that morning, at Neuberg Harbor.

“If there’s such a thing as injustice in this world, it’s that you’re so amazingly beautiful, Ferret.”

The boy’s declaration left the girl in the black dress to sigh loudly.

“From my perspective, the only remarkable injustice in this world is the fact that I had to encounter someone like *you*, Michael.”

“C’mon, that doesn’t apply to relationships. Fate is something you make for yourself, you know. That’s why I think this is a good time to start planning for the future. How many kids do you think we should have?”

“…Sometimes I wish that your brain would function like a television—if only you could behave properly after receiving a sufficiently powerful strike…”

A young couple was standing by the freight entrance at the ferry harbor, whispering sweet nothings into each other’s ears.

Or to be more accurate, the young man was the one doing the whispering, receiving no appropriate response in turn.

“A television, huh? I think we should get a really big one for our living room. Oh! Also, don’t worry about our income. I told you before—I’m going to write children’s books and live with you on a house on the hilltop. And you’re going to be my inspiration for those books, Ferret. I want the children of the world to know the truth! And this is the reality: Ferret, you’re the only truth in my life.”

“…Did you call me out in the middle of the day just so you could subject me to your harassment?”

They were both just past their mid-teens, but the way they carried themselves could not be any more different. The boy was bright and energetic like a child, but the girl was frigid and looked rather like the sheltered daughter of an aristocrat.

“No way! I mean, I think it’s important for me to express my love for you, but if that’s all I wanted, I’d just dive into your coffin!”

“In which case my fangs would tear into your carotid artery without the slightest hesitation.”

The vampire—Ferret von Waldstein—half-joked at her childhood friend’s attempts at flirting.

She was looking rather cold to have been making a joke, but that was not enough to deter Michael.

“Haha. I’d be more than happy if you could drink all of my blood.”

“Of course not. I would toss you away on the spot.”

“What? That’s so cruel of you. But that doesn’t matter—I love you, Ferret!”

As their conversation slowly began to lose coherence, Ferret raised her voice without even thinking. But Michael did not seem at all hurt by her attitude.

“So, the reason I called you out here today is because of the Carnale Festival. Y’know. The opening ceremonies being at your place and all… I wanted to ask you to go see it with me. I mean, last year, things were so hectic I didn’t get a chance to go. But I’m not going to miss it this year!”

“...”

Ferret’s home was Waldstein Castle, the main stage of the Carnale Festival. Each year, performers from around the island were invited to play songs composed by Strassburg in the castle’s music room, and guests would dance to them in the ballroom. The halls would be decorated with Strassburg’s paintings.

Although she was a vampire in name, Ferret was an unusual sort who had no weaknesses to sunlight, running water, or crucifixes. However, she had no special powers that vampires tended to have, like turning into a flock of bats or dissolving into fog.

Ferret’s older twin brother, Relic, was the complete opposite. He possessed countless abilities that befitted a vampire, but he also possessed as many weaknesses as the vampires in movies and novels.

Yet in spite of the twins’ curious nature, Michael treated them no differently than he would treat anyone else. However, that did not mean that he treated them as though they were the same as humans—he respected their nature as vampires in their interactions, while showing them nothing but honest kindness. He was someone the twins were always thankful to for his overwhelming care.

‘If only that care could be directed in a more appropriate way.’ Ferret thought to herself. Although she almost treated Michael as she might a stalker, Michael was well aware of that fact and did not care. In some ways, he was quite thoughtless in this attitude. But his reckless attempts to romance her continued nonetheless.

“Ferret, did you know? If two people look at Strassburg’s paintings while listening to his music on the night of the Carnale Festival, they’ll be blessed for all eternity!”

“Oh my! Then I shall be going in the company of Honored Brother.”

“Wait, what? No, wait! This only works for the two of us, Ferret!”

“And why might that be the case?”

“Because I made it up just now!”

Before Ferret knew it, Michael took hold of her hand. She tightened her grip in retaliation.

“Ouch! Ugh… Heh… Heh heh. For you, Ferret, I can create legends. And I can even sacrifice a hand or two for your sake!” Michael said with a triumphant grin, despite the cold sweat running down his back. Ferret sighed softly in surrender.

“My goodness… Even I cannot help but bow to your stubbornness, Michael.”

“Hah hah, don’t be shy, Ferret. *I’m* the one who can’t help but look away because you’re so beautiful. And, uh… if you forgive me, maybe you could let go of my hand now because it’s really starting to hurt—”

“Of course. If this foolishly tragic legend of yours will elevate your intelligence even minutely, then I shall allow you to accompany me to the performance at the Carnale Festival.” Ferret said quietly, looking away. Michael grinned like a child on Christmas morning, although the cold sweat on his brow from the pain of her vice-like grip did not disappear.

“Sweet! Ouch, ouch… F-F-Ferret? Uh, the tips of my fingers are turning purple, I think… Wait, I’ve got it! You’re holding my hand so tightly because you’re trying to fuse our bodies together, right? Don’t worry! I’ll accept all of that and ouch ouch ouch…”

This was just Ferret being too shy and awkward to make her true feelings clear, Michael convinced himself, as he watched his hand slowly grow numb.

†

“So where are we supposed to get this thing to?”

“Waldstein Castle. We contacted a shipping company, so we just need to get it to the depot.”

As Michael lost himself in his one-sided fantasy, two men working on the cargo in the harbor chatted amongst themselves, standing before a particularly large piece of freight that had been there all morning.

“Huh. That’s not part of our contract, is it?”

“What can we do? I mean, they’re pretty close by and all, but no way they’d send in a truck to pick up *one* piece of private cargo. How’s that one girl supposed to lug this thing up to the castle by herself, right?”

The cargo was a large wooden crate about two meters wide. It had been hoisted onto a very large transport cart with a forklift. The men looked up at the crate, so heavy that only their combined efforts could move it, and began to push the cart to their destination.

“Seriously. How heavy is this thing? What the hell is inside?”

“I hear it’s a suit of armor they’re going to display at the festival.”

“A suit of armor?”

“Yeah. One of Strassburg’s designs, so it’s crazy expensive. So why would they just send in one girl to transport it? And where the hell’d she go, anyway?”

The men grumbled, pushing the cart toward the harbor exit. But they spotted a familiar face about fifty meters ahead.

“Shit! It’s Miss Ferret!”

“Damn it… Does she remember us from before?!”

Just over a year ago, Ferret caught the two men badmouthing Relic and almost murdered them. At the time, Relic was there to save them. But today, he was nowhere to be seen.

“…We’ll be fine. I hope. It’s already been over a year now, right?”

“Right…”

The men nodded, trying to calm themselves despite the cold sweat running down their backs.

They slowly trudged forward, drawing closer and closer to Ferret with the cart rolling ahead of them.

For a split second, Ferret turned toward them as she heard the cart approaching. Her eyes moved towards the men, even as she continued to speak with the boy beside her.

The two workmen could feel their hearts threatening to leap out of their throats, but Ferret quickly turned back to Michael, having lost interest.

The workmen breathed a sigh of relief and veered slightly away from Ferret as they continued toward the exit.

At that very moment, they sensed something.

Something inside the crate was moving.

“Huh?” “What…?”

A powerful impact rocked the cart as they found themselves stopping where they stood.

Before they knew it, the scene before their eyes changed.

First, there was white.

A white stake that had shot out of the side of the crate, looking for all the world like a great white bullet.

Then, there was black.

The scene of the stake piercing the chest of Ferret von Waldstein.

The white stake provided the perfect contrast to the black of her dress.

Then there was red.

It began to seep from the boundary between the two shades, slowly eating at the stake.

The scream of the boy beside Ferret pierced the darkening skies over the harbor.





4章 二人は『食鬼人（イーター）』の道を歩み

Chapter 4: The Two Walk the Path of the Eater, and...

Rudi was dreaming.

There was a story unfolding in his nightmares.

A re-enactment of his past, caused by the memories etched into his mind.

That was why the boy could allow himself to suffer. Because the scene before him was both a dream and reality.

Because its nature as a dream made it impossible for him to resist.

†

“My name is Theodosius M. Waldstein. Call me Theo.”

Rudi was dreaming. Those were the words of the vampire before him, who wore a gentle smile.

With that image as the start, scenes from the past began to weave themselves into a tale before his eyes. Sometimes in fast motion, other times slowly, and yet other times, repeated over and over as though in a proud boast.

But there was one thing they had in common: they were fun memories.

The images he saw were from much happier days.

It was partly the joy of having made a new friend. But if he were to be honest, looking back on it with hindsight in consideration, it was closer to a sense of amusement derived from his feeling of superiority to the rest of the world.

Having met a vampire—having broken out of the frame of the mundane world—Rudi felt as though he had become someone special.

The moment he saw Theodosius—Theo—transform into a flock of bats, he became the hero of a fantastic story. The hero of a tale he created for himself. His childhood friend Theresia, ever by his side, was probably the best fit for the role of heroine.

That was what he thought.

To be frank, perhaps he had never thought that way at all. But now, as he thought back on the past, that was the only possibility that presented itself to him.

‘If I never thought that way… then I never would have done something so stupid. I never would have brought him to the village…’

The boy had been disappointed. He had managed to befriend someone from what seemed like another world entirely, but there was no audience to witness it.

As he became dissatisfied, he began to grow greedy.

‘I’ll introduce this vampire to other people.’

He was certain: to be friends with a vampire was an astounding feat.

‘I’ll act as a bridge between the world of humans and vampires.’

He was already playing out the story of his own heroics in his head. A selfish tale where everything ended happily ever after, with himself on the receiving end of endless praise from the people.

But in the end, the boy’s failure was not the fact that he trusted a vampire.

It was merely that he was unlucky.

That the vampire he just happened to encounter was Theodosius M. Waldstein, a fiend and monster without peer. That was the start of the tragedy.

There was screaming.

Blood, flesh, death.

They were dying. They were all being murdered.

In his dreams, his family and his friend were being killed.

“Why...”

“Why... why did you kill them?!”

“Tell me. Why?! What did I...? What did they ever do to you?!”

He repeated himself over and over again. In both the reality of that day in the past, and in the nightmares he saw since that day.

And for the first time in a long time, his dream continued beyond where it normally stopped.

“It’s because I love you two so very much.”

The vampire in his dream wore a terribly twisted grin, just as he did in the reality of that day, as he looked down upon the boy.

“That’s why I could never forgive you. I could never let your eyes fall onto anyone else. Yes... That’s right. Call it jealousy. I was just jealous.”

The vampire chuckled casually.

And in his arms was the boy’s most beloved family member.

“Sis...”

“Oh, I almost forgot something important!” The vampire said, his voice brimming with hope as Rudi fell deeper into despair.

“Tell me. Do you love your sister? Or do you hate her? Or do you not care about her at all?”

“What?”

In spite of the fact that this was merely a dream, Rudi could feel his heart falter.

If he answered that he loved her, then the vampire would kill her on the spot, using something like jealousy as an excuse.

So the boy decided that he would claim to hate her. Although he would have preferred to have his own mouth torn open instead, he could not trade his sister’s life for anything.

And so he steeled himself—but at that moment, the vampire’s vulgar smile twisted into something even more grotesque.

“If you tell me that you hate her, then I’ll kill her for you!”

“...!”

“If there’s something you hate, it would be better if it didn’t exist. And I would do *anything* for your sake, you know? But don’t be a bratty kid and ask me to kill myself or revive the people I killed, okay?”

The piece of scum standing before the boy could not have been more casual about laying out his offers, complete with caveats, but the boy still could not strike back.

He was too afraid.

Even though his sister was in such danger, his anger could not overcome his fear.

“So... what you tell me now is going to decide if your sister will live or die. I’ll kill her if you say you love her, and I’ll kill her if you say you hate her. What are you going to do? Hah! Try and stop me if you can! Come on, try and save your sister! Ahaha! It’s all on you now. How does it feel, holding your precious family’s life in the palm of your hand? You could even say that you’ve *subjugated* her, just like a vampire! Ahahaha! Hahahahahaha!”

The vampire’s thread of logic did not entirely make sense, but it was enough to etch his words into the boy’s thoughts. It felt as though the sounds entering his ears were rattling his brain from the inside out.

The vampire soon stopped laughing, putting on the most gentle smile yet. He slowly demanded a response.

“Now... tell me your answer.”

There was a story unfolding in his dream.

A re-enactment of his past, caused by the memories etched into his mind.

But the despair he felt in the dream was no less real than what he felt that day, all those years ago.

Rudi must have had this dream many, many, many, many, many times by now. But the depth of that despair never changed.

The dream continued in real time, refusing to spare Rudi.

In the dream, he trembled as he finally opened his mouth to speak.

"_____"

†

And suddenly, he awoke.

Or to be more accurate, he had been awakened.

'I sense a vampire.'

He quickly opened his eyes, but he found himself in a very small space he did not recognize.

The thought of being trapped in a cramped, dark space almost drove him into panic, but he quickly remembered what was going on. They were on their way to Growerth. He would enter the island with the cargo, having been placed in a crate by Theresia and Zygmunt.

Although he could easily enter the island if he removed his armor, they were informed that Growerth was home to an abnormally large, concentrated population of vampires. In such an event, going to the island without the armor would pose him a rather large problem. So he elected to be boxed in with the cargo for the journey to the island.

He was used to being treated as freight, so the experience was nothing new for him. And he had already forgotten the dream he was having only moments earlier.

But the presence of the vampire lingered. This was one thing he could never let slide.

Unlike Shizune, Rudi's grudge was not against all vampires.

The only vampires he despised were those who fed on humans, and the vampire called Theo.

Rudi decided that, before he leapt out of his box, he would have a look at the vampire he had just sensed. He turned his gaze to one of the many peepholes drilled into the sides of the box.

From the way the crate was shaking, he was probably being transported somewhere at that very moment. And the vampire's presence was drawing nearer and nearer.

'There.'

He identified her at a single glance.

The girl in the black dress was clearly different from the world around her.

She was probably slightly younger than himself, but appearances counted for nothing when it came to her kind.

Upon closer inspection, Rudi found that there was a boy beside her whose hand was tightly gripped in hers. At first, he thought that she was assaulting him. But the boy's face and radiant smile told him otherwise.

As Rudi wondered what was going on, the boy and the vampire's conversation began to come into earshot.

"Anyway, Ferret, I'll be the perfect partner for you at the Carnale Festival. You can count on it!"

"...I am afraid your escort may only cause me worry."

"Well, if you can't count on me... you could drink my blood and make me your slave!"

The boy's words rattled Rudi.

'So this kid knows he's talking to a vampire? And... he's not even being subjugated. I heard rumors about this place, but who'd have thought they'd actually be true?

'I've never seen humans and vampires just... chatting like this in the middle of the day where anyone could hear...

'No. I have *seen it before, haven't I?'*

Reminded of his childhood self, Rudi clenched his fist inside his armor.

'I'm sick of this mission already.'

Rudi was to be given more detailed orders from Zygmunt upon arrival. But according to the rumors, Growerth was home to a very large vampire population, some of whom were living amongst the humans. Of course, that was the extent of his knowledge and he had no desire to look into things any more.

Remembering that fact, Rudi took notice of the dark emotion swirling through his heart and quickly rejected it.

If the emotion was anger, he would not have hesitated to unleash it on the spot. But it was something else. An emotion he did not wish to acknowledge—after all, how could he be *envious* of these humans, living in harmony with vampires?

Perhaps that was why he never felt like finding out more about this island. He had only learned the details of this mission *after* being treated like cargo and boxed into a wooden crate. If he had known from the start, he might have turned down the mission altogether.

'Damn it. I'd better finish this job and get off the island quickly.'

Rudi mumbled to himself as he returned to observing the vampire he was slowly approaching.

“Please, I must conduct myself in a manner becoming of the eldest daughter of the Waldstein family. I have no need to be escorted through the festival by a man!”

‘Waldstein…’

The moment the word reached his ears, darkness welled up in his heart once more.

This time, it was outrage.

It was hatred.

And so, he had neither the need nor the desire to deny himself.

“Your escort may very well end with you dragging the Waldstein name through the—”

The girl did not even have a chance to finish her sentence.

The white stake he launched drove itself into her chest.

It was refreshing.

It felt so very refreshing.

†

“We’ve lost her…” Theresia sighed in disappointment. She was standing in a back alley, a slight distance from the harbor.

Staining the ground under her feet were strange black droplets. The trail of stains had begun dotting from around the corner, finally stopping where she stood.

Before the final trace of black droplets was the alley entrance, the many tourists who were there to enjoy the festival, and the main street filled with locals and lined with shops opening up for the day.

“If only this was blood, I could follow after her…”

Things had begun a little earlier.

When Shizune found herself restrained by the ankles, Theresia’s whip bearing down on her, she drew a pair of knives and tore off her own legs.

Although the knives were not so large as to be able to sever human legs so easily, Shizune had forced the blades through flesh and bone with raw power and speed.

She then pivoted around, allowing gravity to drag her to the floor, and plunged the knives into the hands holding her ankles.

“Ugh…”

Ignoring the wincing Melhilm, Shizune put strength into her arms and leapt forward in a handspring.

The sound of the air told her that a powerful attack tore through the spot where she had been standing only a moment ago.

But she did not have time to look back. With her arms against the floor once more, Shizune used all of her strength to throw herself off the side of the building.

Theresia, watching it all unfold, hesitated to follow after her.

“…What are you still doing here, Theresia?”

Melhilm, who was cradling the hands he had returned to his arms, glared at the Eater.

“…She’s getting away, isn’t she. Should I chase after her?”

“Yes!” Melhilm snapped impatiently. Theresia calmly explained herself.

“That woman threw herself into a major street. There are too many potential witnesses around for me to hunt her down in secret. And these eye-catching clothes won’t help, either. Wouldn’t it cause problems for the rest of our mission if I made a scene now?”

“…”

As Theresia predicted, they began to hear people gathering below. It would be unnatural for people to *not* crowd around when a woman with her legs cut off jumped down from a rooftop.

Melhilm considered Theresia’s question for a moment, and finally gave her an order.

“…But we cannot risk her disclosing your presence to other vampires. Maintain a low profile and follow after her. Once you find her hiding-hole, take care of her without being caught.”

“That’s a pretty tough order to follow up on. We’re not assassins.” Theresia said, her expression clouding. Melhilm snorted.

“Then assassins you will become. Remember that the two of you are nothing more than tools of the Organization.”

Without giving Theresia a chance to retort, Melhilm transformed himself into a flock of bats. Strangely enough, each bat was possessed of human eyes. That alone lent them an eerie air—seeing them in a flock of hundreds made them nothing short of monstrous, Theresia thought to herself, as her superior flew off into the distance.

She quickly leapt onto the roof of the next building, then returned to the ground as she began to track Shizune’s trail of blood.

Even if the stream of blood was interrupted at points, Theresia could follow Shizune as long as she continued to bleed. It was not the scent that she chased after—it was the blood,

which practically brimmed with vampiric presence. So as long as Theresia continued to chase after the presence, she would catch up to Shizune.

She pressed on, doing her best to remain unremarkable. But in spite of her worries, her clothing blended in quite well with the rest of the island. Many people were dressed in even more eye-catching costumes, dressed up like puppets and dolls. People did not pay Theresia any mind.

The trail of blood led Theresia to a construction site just next to the harbor. She could probably confirm Shizune's presence there and follow her in person from that point onwards.

However, she stopped in her tracks in front of the paving machine.

Shizune Kijima's trail of blood came to an abrupt stop here.

"...?"

If she had lingered, her presence would only have been strengthened. But why in the world had it gotten weaker?

As Theresia stood there in confusion, one of the construction workers approached her.

"You shouldn't be here, young lady. We're in the middle of work… and there's a bit of a fuss going on here. It might be dangerous."

"Did something happen?"

"Well, the asphalt tank is busted."

The workman pointed towards a yellow vehicle. Smoke was rising from it.

A hot asphalt mixture was leaking from the tank on its back, covering part of the road in black.

As the pool of asphalt continued to grow, Theresia noticed something else.

There was a trail of black leading from the pool.

Almost like a trail of blood.

'It can't be…'

Having arrived at a certain conclusion, Theresia quickly turned her gaze to the trail of black stains. They led into a back alley, at which point she could no longer sense the presence of blood.

'With wounds like that, she couldn't possibly have found anything to stop her bleeding… So… did she use molten asphalt…?!'

Being a vampire, Shizune was in no danger of dying—but this was a crude method of treatment nonetheless. In fact, the 'treatment' could easily turn out for the worse. Even if Shizune possessed regenerative capabilities, that method could at worst leave her crippled forever.

“Geez, what are we supposed to now? The mayor was already pissed that we couldn’t get this done in time for the festival…”

Ignoring Theresia’s shock, the workman worriedly surveyed the site. He then noticed that the former was still there, and quickly softened his expression.

“Anyway, you’re a new face. Are you a tourist, young lady? Weird stuff like this happens sometimes on Growerth. Don’t worry about it. Go on, have fun and enjoy the festival!”

Theresia responded to the man’s smile with one of her own, in spite of herself.

‘I’m sorry.’

Without sparing the man a glance, she turned and began to follow the trail of black.

‘I’m sorry. We’re here to completely destroy this festival you love.’

†

As Theresia began to follow Shizune’s trail, a vicious scene was unfolding in the harbor.

“Ferret…?”

By the time he managed to utter her name, her eyes were already lost to darkness.

“…FERRET!”

Michael caught her in his arms as she fell, calling her name at the top of his lungs.

It had begun all too suddenly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen a pair of workmen from the harbor transporting a large wooden crate.

And when that crate had passed right beside Ferret, there was a noise like the crisp sound of splintering lumber as blood began spouting from her chest.

“A… a… grk… uh…”

Choking incomprehensibly, Ferret brought her hands to her chest in shock. Blood dribbled over her snow-pale skin, sticky and red.

“_____”

The attack must have reached her lungs and paralyzed her respiratory system. Ferret breathed weakly and collapsed where she stood.

“Ferret! Wake up! Someone… someone call a doctor, please! Get an ambulance over here!” Michael cried, loud enough to shake the harbor. He was so distraught that he had forgotten the cell phone in his own pocket and the fact that there would be no use in sending a vampire to a human doctor.

He then realized that a white stake had been driven into her back.

“N-no… No… No! Ferret! Don’t… please don’t turn to ashes! Ferret!”

Stakes were no weaknesses of Ferret, so Michael did not actually have to worry about her turning to ash. But he was in such a panicked state that he forgot even that. Michael desperately tried to pull the stake out of her back, but it was slippery with her blood, refusing to be dislodged.

But even as he fell further into panic, Michael struggled to save Ferret.

At that moment, a calm voice addressed him from above.

“I see. So this place is sister cities with a town in Japan.”

The large shadow cast over Michael read the sign posted in the harbor in a dissonantly casual tone.

It would have been understandable if Michael had ignored the voice in his distraught state, but something in that mysterious voice sent a chill running down his spine. Yet Michael could not turn his eyes from Ferret. He continued to listen to the voice with the back of his head.

“They say that ambulance services are free in Japan. What about this island? Is it just like the mainland? Do you get a bill in the mail after you get a lift?”

‘Who cares?! Hurry up and call an ambulance, you idiot! I’ll foot the bill even if it takes me my whole life to pay it off, so just call an ambulance so the doctor can save Ferret!’

In Germany, doctors were dispatched alongside ambulances. Depending on the situation, even helicopters could be dispatched. But not even in Growerth was there an ambulance service for vampires.

‘I don’t care if it’s a human doctor. So someone please get some help! Someone help me stop Ferret’s bleeding!’ Michael wanted to yell, but something in the voice of the large shadow stopped him. The pressure he felt was almost physically sickening, but he could not let himself fall—at least, not while Ferret lay in agony in his arms.

Perhaps it was that powerful determination that helped him turn around and recognize the caster of the great shadow.

‘Armor?’

A person wearing a gigantic suit of armor.

Although its overall design seemed to be mostly European in style, parts of the ornamentation looked much more Oriental.

Behind the suit of armor was a smashed wooden crate on a cart, and two hapless workmen struggling to get to their feet and escape.

The suit of armor covered its wearer's face completely, but from the voice that came from it, the wearer was likely a young man.

"That's right. I've been on an ambulance before, back on the mainland. But… the rest of my family… they got to ride something less common. A police vehicle. A car… that carries corpses…"

Although the man's voice trailed off, the weight of his presence only intensified as he went on.

Michael could feel his senses blanking out from the pressure. But he could still pick out the element in the man's voice that had been bothering him all this time.

Bloodlust.

The coldest, most murderous emotion he had ever felt was bearing down on him, focused on the vampire in his arms.

At that moment, it finally hit Michael that this armored man must have been the one responsible for driving a stake into Ferret's back.

"You… you're the one who… how could you… HOW COULD YOU?!"

'It was him! It was him! It was him! It was him! It was him!

'How could he how could he HOW COULD HE?!'

He thought nothing.

Michael gently laid Ferret's body on the ground before lunging at the suit of armor with his hands clenched into fists.

He honestly thought nothing.

The sound of eggs cracking slid off the surface of the armor. Several new joints were broken into Michael's fingers. The skin over the new bends in his digits were torn apart as his fists turned red, like sponges soaking in scarlet ink.

There was a sharp pain in his hands, followed by a delayed wave of agony.

But despite the unrelenting assault of pain, Michael continued to think nothing. His only driving force was his anger and hatred at the one who hurt his beloved.

And his anger at himself, for being unable to so much as scratch the hateful foe who had appeared out of nowhere.

The bones in his hands were broken, barely wrapped in folds of skin. He could no longer make a fist with his hands, but he continued to strike at the armored man's stomach.

"Damn it…! You bastard! How could you?!"



Red stains began to appear on the surface of the armor, and Michael's fingers were on the verge of being ripped off entirely. But at that moment, the armored man reached out with both hands and took Michael's wrists.

"...Stop this. I don't have any business with you." He said calmly, turning his gaze at some point behind Michael.

Noticing this, Michael slowly looked back.

His look of outrage was instantly erased, replaced by an overjoyed smile.

"That... is correct... This is not your battle, Michael..."

"Ferret!"

Standing there was the vampire on whose behalf Michael was fighting—Ferret, her clothes soaked in blood as she held a white stake in her right hand, having pulled it out herself.

The hole in her chest had already been mended, but perhaps she had lost too much blood—her usual pallor had only worsened, making her look almost like a corpse.

"Ferret! Are you okay?!"

Shaking off the armor's grip on his wrists, Michael tried to embrace Ferret. But she took his arm and pulled him behind herself.

"That is what I would like to ask *you*, Michael. Now, please... you must get away from here."

"What? I couldn't do that, Ferret! I'm not going to leave you!"

Although the fact of Ferret's survival erased most of Michael's hatred of the armored man, his anger had yet to abate. He continued to glare at the man alongside Ferret.

"You will only get in my way, Michael. And I do not know if I could defeat this man to begin with..." Ferret mumbled, before turning to glare at the armored man.

"...How barbaric, tearing the clothes of a complete stranger." She said mockingly, although on the inside she was desperately trying to find answers. The man's voice was completely unfamiliar, and she did not know anyone who was so strange as to walk around the streets dressed in full armor.

But something about the armor itself felt vaguely familiar. Although she could not recall where she had seen it before, the distinctive design of the work was carved into some corner of her memories.

As Ferret slowly regained her calm, the man in the armor confessed his shock.

"That's amazing. I thought I'd pierced your heart for sure, but to think even that stake wasn't enough... And your regenerative capabilities are top-notch, even counting all the damned vampires I've killed so far."

From the man's words, Ferret was certain that he was in the business of hunting vampires. A group of Hunters had also come to the island last year, and this man was likely similar to

them. Although Ferret also considered that the man might be a vampire, the words ‘damned vampires’ made the possibility quite unlikely.

‘Why did he attack me, even though I was walking outside in the middle of the day? How did he know that I am a vampire?’

Her black dress, eye-catching as it was, did not adequately explain the attack. Even setting aside the fact of the festival, no Hunter would attempt a kill based on manner of dress alone, lest he risk being hunted himself by the police.

Then how did the man in the armor know that she was a vampire?

There were two possibilities.

The first was that this Hunter was hired by someone to kill her specifically, and was given a photograph to find her by. Ferret wondered for a moment who might do such a thing, and quickly remembered the face of the mayor of Neuberg.

The second possibility was that the man in the armor was a human being who could sense the presence of vampires—an Eater.

As Ferret cautiously continued to speculate about his identity, the man in the armor continued speaking, utterly calm.

“Looks like you’ve trained that human well, and without even subjugating him. How’d you get him to listen? Or do perfect-looking vampires like you just have to do a little sweet-talking to get men kneeling at your feet?”

“Hey, you’ve got that wrong! I’m following Ferret because I *want* to follow her! And this isn’t something to brag about, but Ferret has *never* tried to sweet-talk me! Ever!” Michael cried, stepping forward to protect Ferret. But she caught him and slammed him backwards.

“I understand, so *please* get yourself to a doctor now, Michael!” She said, the intensity of her fixed gaze on the armored man speaking for how dangerous she understood him to be.

But the man turned his gaze from Ferret, as though his venom had subsided.

“...Looks like we’re getting some onlookers coming our way.”

People were gathering at the harbor, drawn by the loud noises. There seemed to have been some sort of a commotion nearby earlier, and the people drawn in by the first incident were now moving on to the incident at the harbor.

“I’ll let you off easy for today.” The armored man said. Ferret glanced over at the harbor entrance.

Not a second later, a jolt of pain ran up her leg.

“...!”

A long, thin, white stake was sticking out of her leg, over her skirt. It was slightly different in shape from the one that had been driven into her back earlier.

‘When... did he...?’

The armored man showed no sign of having budged. But something shot towards her like a bullet, lodging itself in her ankle.

“I see. So you’ve never been in a real fight before.”

“F-Ferret!”

Michael, who lay crumpled in a heap, raised his voice as he took to his feet and rushed toward Ferret so he could carry her to safety.

But the armored man caught him easily, pulling him off the ground at breakneck speed.

“AAAAAAAAAHHHHHH! FERREEEEEEEEET!”

Before he knew it, Michael was lying on his back on the deck of the ferry moored in the harbor.

And although Michael had no idea what was going on, Ferret, who was pulling out the stake from her thigh, saw everything clearly.

The suit of armor, which looked to be easily over a hundred kilograms in weight, had flown through the air and landed on the ferry.

No human was capable of such strength.

In fact, most vampires were probably no match for that display of raw power. Ferret was now certain of the man’s identity, for she had met a woman with similar abilities in the past.

The woman’s name was Shizune Kijima.

‘He must be an Eater!’

Doing everything in her power to ignore the pain in her leg, Ferret kicked off the ground to give chase.

Compared to her armored foe, she was physically much weaker. But being so lightweight, she managed to propel herself onto the buoy floating beside the ferry. She then leapt from it and barely managed a landing on the deck.

Because the crew was still preparing the ship for its next trip, only Ferret, Michael, and the armored man were on the deck.

The man noted Ferret’s pursuit, surprised by her determination.

“So you followed after me, huh. Does that mean you’re sure you can beat me? Or is this human just that important to you?”

The man’s youthful tone struck a stark contrast to the appearance of his armor, but Ferret did not let her guard down. She still had no idea how he had shot those stakes at her, but they were fast and devastating. Ferret was not confident that she could dodge them, even if she focused her senses to their utmost limits.

Then why in the world had she come after the man?

If she ran to the castle and called for help, she could have enlisted the assistance of one or more of many creatures who could defeat this man. So why did she insist on pursuing the armored man herself?

The answer was simple.

But she did not want to admit it.

If the situation were not so dire, she might have spared a moment to allow herself to blush. But 'danger' did not even begin to describe the state she and Michael were in now.

"In any event, I ask that you let that human go. Those like him should have no bearing on the conflict between vampires and Eaters."

"You talk like you've come straight out of the past… just like *he* used to."

There was a powerful emotion filling the man's comment, but Ferret had no idea what it meant.

"I'm actually a bit thankful, you know? For your regenerative abilities, I mean. If I'd ended up killing you then and there… I'd have lost the clue I was so desperate to find."

"...A clue?" Ferret wondered. The armored man continued coldly.

"Where is he? Where is the vampire named Theodosius?"

"...?"

'I have never heard of anyone by that name.' Ferret was about to reply.

"...?"

But there was something tugging at the corners of her memory.

Theodosius. The rhythm and tonality of the name was unfamiliar, but there was something about it that continued to bother her.

After a moment of thought, she finally recalled a very vague memory.

As she thought, Ferret had never heard the name before—but she had *read* the name once in the past.

It was many years ago, when she and Relic were still quite young. They were sitting in the castle's dining room. Their adopted father Gerhardt was going on about nothings at length, and Ferret faintly recalled that name being mentioned at one point in her father's speech.

As Ferret stiffened, the man in the armor questioned her again.

"Theodosius M. Waldstein. How many vampires do you find with ostentatious surnames like that? Is there someone among your family by that name?"

Ferret's memory began to come into focus.

‘I remember. Father was speaking to us about the Waldstein family, and—’

“So you *do* know something.”

The man in the armor did not miss Ferret’s moment of silence.

But Ferret would not back down so easily. As long as she was in possession of the information their attacker needed, she still had a chance of negotiating with the man.

“…I will speak on one condition. Let Michael go this instant!” She cried.

To Ferret’s surprise, the armored man’s helm nodded easily as he tossed Michael towards the far end of the deck.

Of course, even a light toss by an Eater was enough to send Michael flying almost ten meters, slamming onto the deck with a chilling thud.

“Mi-”

As she began to call his name, Ferret naturally turned towards Michael.

And she repeated her mistake.

She had once more turned her attention from the armored man, at whom she should have focused all of her senses.

“-chael…”

The voice calling for her childhood friend scattered at the impacts that shook her body.

In that short span of time, seven white stakes had been shot at Ferret.

Of them, four had accurately pierced the tendons of her arms and legs. Ferret lay spread-eagle on the deck, looking little different from an insect on display.

“Urgh… agh…”

Pain overwhelmed her. An indescribable sense of heat, accompanied by agony, began to assault the rest of her body as her mind descended into maddening confusion.

As Ferret lay there, her ability to hear no longer apparent, the armored man addressed her in a monotone.

“Now that I know you’re sturdy, I’m going to go rougher. The people at the harbor office are probably going to hear about the commotion and climb aboard here soon.

“So consider yourself… *fuel*. Fuel to bring *him* despair.”

Filling his voice was hatred. Directionless animosity.

But there was something about the voice that also carried a tone of self-loathing.

†

As the vampire lay at his feet, Rudi slowly began to calm the flames burning within.

‘I can’t kill her. Not yet. Not yet.’

Holding back his excitement, the Eater in the armor slowly approached the fallen girl.

‘First, I’ll make her tell me where Theo is. Then I’ll smash her head while Theo watches. So I can’t kill her. I can’t kill her yet. I have to hold back…’

He had wanted to place all the weight of his armor upon the head of the vampire, who was now completely still, and crush it where it lay. But he desperately quelled his urges.

Although he had no mercy for most other vampires, Rudi had never felt so fervently emotional on a hunt. But today was a special exception.

For nearly ten years, he had been hunting down the vampire who massacred his family. And now, a clue to his nemesis’s whereabouts was finally within reach.

And of all things, the clue lay with a vampire who shared Theo’s surname. Perhaps they were relatives. Perhaps they were family.

‘So he has a family*?’*

The thought fanned the flames of hatred in his heart.

‘So he steals away my family… massacres my loved ones… and goes on living as if nothing’s ever happened?! Tasting happiness with a family to call his own?!’

Before he knew it, he had shot another stake, this time into the girl’s stomach.

“Urgh… Gah…”

The vampire groaned in pain. But Rudi didn’t feel even a sliver of pity.

‘That’s right. This vampire must be just like him. Seducing humans with her words… Shit! Just like him! I can already tell… in the end, she’s going to turn on that kid, too.’ Rudi thought, taking one step towards Ferret.

“…Now talk. Where is he?”

The girl was barely able to vocalize, let alone speak, but Rudi questioned her heartlessly. When he noted that her lips were not moving, he raised one foot in order to break her leg.

But as he stood with one foot in the air, he froze.

When he decided to torture the girl for information, he had hesitated for a single moment. Was this really the best place, he wondered. The presence of the human boy bothered him—the boy who was so very much like himself when he was still a child, deceived by a vampire.

‘This might be hard for him to watch. But that shouldn’t matter to me. And he’s still better off than the way I was left back then. He’s… going to get over it.’

He glanced over at the direction in which he had thrown the boy.

‘Wait. Where is he?’

He was certain that the impact of the fall had knocked the boy unconscious. But before he knew it, the boy was gone. With his injuries, he could not have moved at anything faster than a walking pace. So where had he gone?

‘Did he run off?’

The boy had probably understood the danger he was in and leapt off the ferry. Now there was nothing stopping Rudi from brutalizing this creature. All he had to do was finish before onlookers arrived.

He began to slam down his foot to start where he left off, and looked down at the vampire.

But his eyes widened in an instant as he hurriedly angled his foot away. He almost ended up losing his balance, but he just managed to stay on his feet.

‘Damn it.’

There was someone covering the place where Ferret was lying.

It was the boy named Michael, whom he had tossed away earlier.

“Ferret…”

The boy gave all of his attention to the girl, not even looking at Rudi.

He was focusing all of his efforts into pulling out the stakes that were lodged into her. For vampires, having stakes piercing into their bodies was usually more damaging than the blood loss that followed the removal of the stakes. But whether Michael understood that or not, he helped Ferret sit up and took hold of one of the stakes.

“…Stop this.”

Rudi anxiously grabbed Michael by the arm and forcibly pulled him away from the girl.

He was jolted by the fact that the boy he saw as being very much like himself had taken such an action. The action of helping a vampire.

Michael, held in midair, showed no sign of fear. Instead, he swung his mangled right arm at Rudi again.

“Let go! Let me go! I’m going to help Ferret! Don’t get in my way!”

His emotions must have gotten the better of his sense of reason, Rudi thought. It was almost as if Michael had locked all of his hatred and anger within himself by prioritizing the safety of the vampire.

Rudi easily caught Michael’s punch with his other hand. His grip began to tighten.

“…*You’re* the one who’s getting in the way.”

The force of his grip grew stronger.

Although it was little more than a trifling show of strength for beings like vampires and Eaters, their power was itself a weapon for normal humans like Michael.

A moment later, there was a sickening noise.

A stomach-churning sound.

Michael's right hand, which had been forced into the shape of a fist by raw determination, went limp. His fingers, splayed out in all sorts of unnatural directions, flopped helplessly like puppets with their strings cut.

Noting the damage he caused, Rudi turned to resume his interrogation of the vampire. He judged that Michael would be incapacitated by the pain of the compression fracture.

But Michael betrayed his expectations once more.

He stared at his numb right wrist, with a puzzled look. Then—

"STOP GETTING IN MY WAAAAAAAAAAY!"

He swung his broken arm at Rudi, still intent on fighting back.

'Damn it.'

His annoyance at the human boy worsened.

Rudi had no idea why the boy's actions bothered him so much. No—he did not *want* to know. He *must* not know. His every thought guided by this focus, Rudi cut off all lines of thinking.

A moment later, a white stake was driven into Michael's shoulder.

Although it was not an immediately lethal wound, the boy would inevitably lose a great deal of blood. The agony of the injury spun through his every nerve, threatening to disable even his breathing and vision.

Having done such violence upon a normal human being, Rudi momentarily broke free from his outrage.

"Let me make this clear. You're powerless. Determination alone won't be enough for you to change things here." He said to the weak human being.

Rudi then came to a realization.

'Wait. This tone… it's just like Theo's…'

Realizing that his image of himself was beginning to overlap with that of the vampire he loathed above all else, Rudi shook off the thought in horror. He realized that he had been denying this thought for quite some time now, and understood that he was currently not himself.

Normally, he would never take any action that drew attention to himself. This change in him was all the fault of the Waldstein name.

'But it's going to be all over soon. That name won't bother me anymore. I'm so close…'

As long as he could find the whereabouts of Theodosius M. Waldstein, everything would be all right—or rather, nothing else would matter. He would no longer have any reason to take orders from Zygmunt the Green, Melhilm the Violet, or Caldimir the Blue. All he needed was Theo's location. He would then torment his nemesis and finally take his life.

Killing him would end everything.

As Rudi once more steeled his resolve, he heard from underfoot something like the croaking of a dying frog.

"Aaaaargh… agh… graah… hah…"

It was Michael, lying on the deck and twitching with the stake through his shoulder.

The pain had finally overcome his brain functions. The explosive anger he had shown earlier was no more.

Yet he still latched onto Rudi's ankle with his intact left arm and, in contrast with his earlier emotional outburst, he squeezed out a trembling voice in half-sobs.

"…D, don't… kill…"

Rudi's annoyance evaporated at the sight of Michael's foolish pleading.

Seeing the boy prioritize his own life over that of his loved one, Rudi remembered his own past.

'That's right… You're doing good. You're just human. Forget about vampires and live your life in peace.'

For Rudi, acknowledging Michael's plea for mercy was as good as acknowledging the actions of his past self. He was, in a roundabout way, trying to seek approval that his choice on that day was a perfectly natural one for a person to make. Even though he knew that this acknowledgement—this acceptance—would solve nothing, he still sought it out for himself.

"…Please… don't… don't do it…"

'Humans don't belong in fairy tales. Those stories are for looking at from a distance, from another world altogether. That's the role given to humanity.'

"All right. I'll spare you. It's my personal policy to spare anyone who begs for their life, but I never had any reason to kill you in the first place, anyway." Rudi mumbled, slightly relieved, and offered Michael a hand.

Although the boy was badly injured, he was not even close to being on the verge of death. But his wounds would eventually become scars that reminded him to never approach vampires and their like ever again. Then another tragedy would be averted.

“…I… I don’t care… what you do to me… So please… don’t… don’t kill Ferret…! Please… Please… I’m begging you… spare Ferret…”

Rudi’s thoughts came screeching to a halt.

The right hand he reached out towards the boy tensed as his nerves and muscles stiffened.

‘Why…?’

Michael’s words were essentially an act of rejection towards Rudi’s past actions.

Although Michael never intended for such a thing, this was indeed as good as rejection to Rudi.

‘Why… why would you choose to save the vampire instead?’

His ears must have been playing tricks on him, he wanted to think. But Michael stumbled to his feet defiantly, and stood before Ferret to defend her.

“You’re… not going to kill Ferret…”

His words and actions both were borderline nonsensical to Rudi. Although Michael’s wounds were not fatal, they should have been deep enough for him to begin fearing for his life. And Michael did not seem to be the type to be unaware of death at all.

‘Because of Theo… I left my sister to die… and begged him like a dog to spare me… So why*? Why is this kid going so far… even though she’s not family… even though she’s a vampire… even though she’s related to Theo?!*

‘I don’t understand.

‘I’m so confused.’

Images from the past came to life before his eyes.

The scene from his dream unfolded before him.

In his waking dream, he could see himself standing there begging for his life. But he no longer saw the image of Michael overlapping with the child he once was.

Rather, the image of Michael defending the vampire looked almost heroic and lofty, while his old self—standing there with tears rolling down his face—looked nothing short of foolish.

‘Is it just because he’s older than I was back then? Is that why he’s willing to throw away his life to save someone?!’

With that thought, Rudi found himself re-imagining the past, placing it several years after it had originally taken place.

Perhaps he might have acted otherwise if he had the power of an Eater as he did now—but the self that had lived as a perfectly ordinary human being would never deviate in his choice, no matter his age.

‘Then… Then what about now?! Why am I repeating the same scene from before… but from the same viewpoint as that bastard?!’

The thought he had tried to shake off returned to him once more.

And unlike his old self, the boy named Michael refused to back down. He continued to stand before his loved one, fighting on her behalf.

In other words—

‘Does this mean that… I’m just an inferior version of Theo…? The “me” that’s standing here now… is just like…

‘No!

*‘No no no no

She was so exhausted that she could not be certain that she had clearly heard the exchange between Michael and the armored man.

But Ferret was essentially an immortal being. She was unaffected by running water, stakes, or sunlight. And according to Doctor, she could probably recover even from being burnt to ashes, given enough time. He was quite keen on conducting such an experiment, but Ferret had politely declined.

The armored man had probably threatened her because he had no idea that she could not be killed.

Immortality, however, was not enough to grant her endless strength. And setting her body aside, her psyche was far from invincible.

But this was no time to be thinking this way, she told herself. The many stakes piercing her body prevented her muscles and organs from regenerating. At this rate, she could very well be chopped into pieces.

However, that was also an option that she could not ignore. If she were in pieces, the armored man would leave her for dead. Then she would have escaped peril. And once she had gotten these stakes out of her and recovered, she would make him regret everything he had done.

'I will make you regret what you did to me… and Michael.'

But the armored man's demand was about as unexpected as they came.

"...Cut off that Michael kid's right hand. Personally."

"What… are you saying...?" Her lungs had recovered just enough to allow her to speak, albeit with great difficulty. "...Are you… insane? ...What meaning is there… in such an act?"

But either way, she was not obligated to meet the man's demands. If he wanted to cut her to pieces, he would. If he wanted to crush her, he could do so with little effort.

"There *is* no meaning to it. You two just annoy me, that's all. I'd be happy to kill you both, but I don't want to murder a human, and you still have the information I need. So what am I supposed to do with this frustration? Just looking at a damned vampire like you annoys me. So what am I supposed to do?!"

Ferret didn't even know why the man was so frustrated in the first place. Perhaps she could understand if he was only attacking her. But why did he have to involve Michael as well?

She wanted to point this out, struggling to speak, but she began to sense the growing madness in the voice of the man as it surged like a great wave. Words were already useless at that point.

"...Say something now you monster I said you're annoying me so can't you even apologize properly?"

Ferret remained silent. The armored man stomped down on one of the stakes boring through her leg.

“Agh…”

Though she did not want to let out a scream, her body automatically reacted to the pain. And as she lay there in agony, the armored man placed even more weight into his foot as he continued to ramble in frustration.

“I’m telling you to prove it monsters like you can never befriend human beings you can chop off a person’s hand without a second thought to save your own skin so prove to me you’re a damned monster do it now!”

There wasn’t a speck of reason or logic in the man’s breathless demand.

The stake that he continued to drive into her leg left her entire body in agony. It was a kind of pain she had never experienced in the past. Had she ever faced such direct bloodlust and suffering before?

Eventually, her brain stopped relaying the pain to her altogether. Perhaps something had happened to her spine—her other senses were beginning to freeze up one by one.

But her mouth was still working.

She could still speak.

Though her lungs were clearly weak, on the verge of paralysis, she coldly glared up at the armored man.

“You… are pitiful… Do I look like a woman… who would stoop so low… to save something like her own life…?!”

The disdain in her tone was clear. So another stake was driven into her stomach.

“…Ugh… Agh…”

“…So it still hasn’t hit you. The fact that you’re going to die.”

She could feel the man’s voice go cold in an instant.

She could also feel the emotions in his voice reach the breaking point once more.

The armored man stomped down on Ferret’s slender body over and over again, turning his shaky breathing into the howls of a child in a fistfight.

“So is that all life is worth to you?! Treating it like dirt… and you don’t even *think* about the fact that your life could also end! That’s what pisses me off the most about you vampires! Acting like you’re completely safe, as if you’ll never be held responsible for your actions! You… you vampires! You… trample on humans like they’re ants… you toy with human lives just like humans step on insects and grass!”

He stomped down again and again and again and again.

Over and over again.

Again, until he began to lose count.

Ferret could feel her upper body go numb, but even in her daze she tried desperately to see if Michael was all right. But unable to sit up on her own, she had no choice but to give in.

But she heard it.

Her ears, still functioning despite her injuries, clearly picked up his voice.

“Stop… hurting Ferret… with that nonsense…”

It was a dying voice, the words being stuttered out between gasps of pain.

And she saw him.

Her eyes, still able to sense light, clearly saw everything.

‘No… get away…’

“…By your logic… from the ants’ perspective… humans are monsters… did you ever think about that?”

‘He’s going to kill you, Michael! Please, you have to leave me and go!’ Ferret wanted to scream, but she could not move.

Although her eyes and ears were still alive, her mouth and vocal cords failed to respond so accurately. It wasn’t just the physical trauma getting in her way—the psychological shock of the assault had also rattled her body.

“…So you’re still moving, huh. I’m surprised you can still bring yourself to talk, but I gotta hand it to you. That’s some determination you’ve got there, trying to fight me after all that.” The armored man said to Michael, his voice lowered. “But you should have stayed down. At this rate, you’ll end up dying before that vampire.”

“…No… you’d never… be able to kill Ferret…”

“I can, and I will.”

The armored man took Michael’s stammered claim as a bluff.

“Ferret… Ferret is a strong vampire… she doesn’t have… any weaknesses… water, fire, stakes, crucifixes… she’s special. She’s not weak to any of that stuff… So even if you tear her to bits… even if you break her… she’s never going to die!”

‘Michael, you idiot! Never mind what he does to me—you are provoking him into hurting you*!’*

Ferret cursed herself for being unable to move or speak. She desperately tried to dislodge the stakes that were buried in her body, but at this point, she had lost the strength for even that.

“…But you know… that doesn’t mean… you can hurt her… and get away with it… But I… I can’t do a thing to help her! This… isn’t fair… this is *not fair*…!”

“So what’s your point?”

As Michael's cries grew stronger, the armored man slowly turned to him.

'"Not fair"? Is he talking about how weak he is? Hmph. There's no such thing as "fair" when you're up against a vampire. This isn't a game or a sport. This is a hunt. This is revenge.' Thought the armored man, but the boy before him cried out as though in rejection.

He took a deep breath and raised his voice, ignoring even the pain searing through his bones and flesh.

"Why… aren't you… killing *me*? *I'm* the one you're really angry at!"

"…!"

"I may be stupid, but even I can see that much! Don't underestimate me! So… so why are you trying to kill Ferret and not me?! Kill *me*! Just because you're an Eater… just because you hunt vampires… That doesn't mean hating vampires is going to solve everything! Damn it… Damn it! So if you want to kill someone, kill *me*!"

†

'He saw through me.

'This kid… read me like a book.'

It felt as though something dear had been taken from him and ruthlessly trampled upon.

For a split second, the taste from his nightmare returned to him, instantly clouding his thoughts.

In the past, Theo had marched into his world, taking advantage of his weakness. And in what was an uncomfortable retread of his pain from that day, the boy before him was now reminding him of that very weakness.

'He saw right through me.

'This kid… who doesn't even know how good he has it… saw through me!

'How?! How could he know?!

'He must be a vampire.

'I want to tell him not to act like he knows what I'm thinking… but it's true. It's all true.

'No, he's human.

'I'm envious of him.'

"Stop…"

‘But I have to say it. I have to say it out loud…’

“…Stop acting like you know me!”

“If… if I knew you… I wouldn’t be saying stuff like this to begin with!”

‘Let’s pretend that I didn’t hear that.

‘That’s right. I don’t hear a thing. I didn’t hear anything.’

“…No. It’s over. Don’t say another word. I know what you’re thinking. You want to become a vampire, don’t you? You’re so crazy about them that you want to join them, right? I get it. You’re thinking that even these injuries must be a cheap price to pay for immortality.”

“I—”

“Shut up!”

‘I know. I know. I’m jealous of him. So that’s enough. As long as I know.

‘Kid, I’m going to kill you.

‘I don’t sense anything from you, but you must be a vampire. That’s right. Let’s just say that you are.

‘So I’m sure killing you won’t cause me any grief. Because I’m just killing someone I’m jealous of.

‘In fact, I bet it’ll feel great.

‘It’s okay. I…

‘…I’ve always been really good at lying to myself.’

Readying one of his stakes, Rudi took aim at the boy’s head.

“EYAAAAAAAAAAHH! Wh-what’ve you done?!”

Suddenly joining them on the deck was the voice of a third party.

Rudi turned, realizing that he had let his guard down. He saw men in work wear, parents with their children, and office workers boarding the ferry. They must have been drawn here by the commotion.

At the head of the line was an elderly woman with a bent back, hobbling straight to the scene.

“What is the meaning of this, you ruffian?! For pity’s sake, what’ve these children done to deserve this…?”

‘Damn it. I took too much time.’

At this rate, the police would be on the scene in minutes. Of course, the bigger problem was the fact that so many people had witnessed him.

But Rudi had neither time nor reason to worry about the completion of Melhilm's plans. His first priority was to take the clue that lay before him and escape his predicament. He could subdue civilians with ease, but he could not waste any time.

'Maybe I should just kill this kid before I go.'

"Goodness me, we've got to bring a doctor here, quickly!"

The old woman's exclamations continued to interrupt Rudi's resolve to kill. She even stepped in front of Ferret, her baggy, loose-fitting clothes billowing in the wind.

'Damn it…

'…?'

Rudi glared at the woman, irritated. But he began to sense something strange.

'What is this feeling? Something's not right.'

Because Rudi had been estranged from ordinary human life for so long, it took him some time to understand what was bothering him so much.

And the time he took left him vulnerable for a critical moment.

'That's right! Some guy in a suit of armor beats a couple half to death, but none of these people look scared—'

"—ugh…! What…? Is this…?!"

By the time he understood the reason for his discomfort, he was reeling in pain.

At first, Rudi thought that he had been shot with a cannon.

There was the sound of a powerful impact, followed by an overwhelming shock as he entire body shook from the blow.

His body felt the numbness before the pain, which meant that he had no idea where the attack had come from. As he turned in confusion, looking from side to side, he caught sight of a bizarre scene he had no memory of seeing before.

"If you've got a mouth, try and speak, you hooligan."

It was a guttural, bestial voice. A voice that seemed to rumble out of the depths of the earth.

The words it formed were no different from the kind spoken by the elderly woman who had been standing there only moments earlier.

But the creature that now loomed before him could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be reconciled to her appearance.

Until just moments ago, Rudi's suit of armor towered over everyone at the scene. But the creature before him, covered in white fur, was almost his exact match in height.

The elderly woman's baggy clothing were a perfect fit for her new form, allowing her to move about freely. And in spite of the summer temperatures, steam was rising from her breaths. And on that note, her face was taking on the shape of something suspiciously similar to a muzzle.

The skin that showed under the sleeves of her clothing was covered in inhuman fur. The tips of her fingers were adorned with claws that could rival knives of steel. Her eyes were full of strength and determination that could kill anything that met her gaze.

"A werewolf…!" Rudi cried without thinking, finally realizing what the woman was.

'Is she the girl's familiar?! Or maybe… Theo's?!'

Either way, no sane werewolf would transform in the midst of such a crowd. To reveal her true form before onlookers was essentially an act of asking to be attacked.

As Rudi questioned the woman's motive, this time he felt an impact on the back of his helm.

He quickly turned. There was a child there, about ten years of age and glaring at him with lupine eyes. He was accompanied by his family. He had leapt high into the air to kick the suit of armor in the back of the head.

'He's fast.'

Rudi had not been taken off guard because his attacker was a child. In fact, he did not even have time to lower his guard in the first place.

The boy's father quickly rushed in and grabbed the boy by the collar, holding him back. His movements also were inhumanly quick.

"Hey you! Pick on someone your own size! Stop hurting Ferret and Michael!" The boy cried, swinging his arms and legs in spite of his father's hold on him. And despite the strangeness of this entire scene, the onlookers showed no sign of surprise or shock whatsoever.

All Rudi could see in their eyes was a united sense of outrage directed at him.

'It can't be… are these people all werewolves? Swarming in the streets in broad daylight?! And just how many of them are there?!'

Rudi stood there in shock. At that moment, a group of rowdy young men, their hair dyed in reds and blues and their ears and noses pierced, began to taunt him.

"Hey… Dunno who you are and what hole you crawled out of, but whaddaya think you're doing?"

"You ain't no Hunter. Why the hell'd you even attack Michael?"

"Who cares? Let's just slaughter him."

"No. We keep him alive. We need to find out if he's under orders from someone."

“Hey, Granny Job. We’ll help out too.”

“Let’s grab this punk. We’ll beat the answers out of him later.”

The men stepped forward one at a time. Their eyes were already clearly inhuman—they were ready to transform at a moment’s notice.

Rudi considered the blow from the silver werewolf before him, and the kick from the young werewolf.

An adult werewolf at full strength would obviously be stronger and faster than a child. With that in mind, Rudi guessed at the overall strength of the group of werewolves.

‘They’re strong. They’re in a whole different league from the ones I killed at the mine.’

Were these werewolves merely of a stronger bloodline, or had they trained themselves more than the ones he encountered before? Although Rudi could not tell, if these werewolves’ eyesight could match their physical speeds, not even his stakes would be effective against them.

‘I wouldn’t break a sweat destroying them all if I took off my armor, but… I can’t. I can’t risk taking this off. If only Theresia were here…’

Ferret and Michael were already in the arms of the elderly silver werewolf. The other werewolves were now beginning to transform as well.

‘Shit! Now I’m going to lose that vampire… The clue I found after all these years… gone!’

Rudi clicked his tongue, irritated. He then bent his knees very slightly, leaned forward, and kicked off the deck of the ferry.

There was a loud noise like cannon fire. Part of the deck collapsed inward as Rudi used the momentum to leap high into the air. He had, however, leapt away from the harbor—he was headed for the ocean.

Stretching forward, he fell vertically into the waves.

Though loud, the impact was decidedly different from the one before. Water splashed all the way onto the deck.

Several werewolves scrambled up to the edge of the ferry and looked into the water. But they did not see the suit of armor float to the surface.

“Did he kill himself? Maybe he thought he couldn’t beat us all…”

“No. Judging from the strength of that jump, I wouldn’t put it past him to swim through ocean currents in that armor.”

“…In other words, he ran away.”

“Granny Job. Want us to go after him?”

The werewolves turned to the oldest member among them, the silver werewolf.

But Job shook her head and growled at the others in a low voice.

“We’ve got to take the boy to a doctor and get these cursed things out of Miss Ferret… Leave the ruffian. Even if you find him, you’ll not beat him on your own.”

Having already gauged her foe’s strength, Job gently placed Ferret on the ground.

Michael seemed to be relieved now. He had lost consciousness entirely, and was now muttering Ferret’s name as though sleep-talking.

Ferret was still holding on to consciousness by a thread. She opened her eyes and weakly looked at Job.

“I’m sorry, child. We thought we ought to give the two of you some time alone and went to prepare for the festival over yonder… We never should’ve taken our eyes off you.”

The werewolf bowed her head in apology. Ferret heard Michael calling her name. And with that, she smiled in relief, allowing herself to slowly fall unconscious.

†

Afternoon. The southern shores of Growerth.

Rudi approached a deserted shore, water spouting from every gap in his suit of armor.

The shore was rocky, unsuited to swimming but perfect for fishing. However, most of the would-be fishermen were busy with the festival preparations that day. Even the roads and residences nearby were nearly deserted.

‘Perfect place for a break, huh.’

Rudi took shelter behind the rocks, slowly relaxing his senses.

He relaxed his thoughts.

He began to wonder why he had gotten so angry earlier.

There was indeed a reason. That boy.

But he cut off his thoughts there.

Of course, the memory was still fresh in his mind. But he refused to go any further, for fear of once again letting his rage boil over. The foe he wanted to take it all out on was not here to begin with.

‘I shouldn’t waste my energy. I’ll have Theresia help me kill that vampire girl while we’re doing that mission for Zygmunt.’

His thoughts then wandered to the werewolves.

‘What were they, anyway? They must be servants of the local vampires, but I’ve never seen so many of them in one place before. And I don’t even know if that was their entire population, or just a fraction…

‘Now… how do I meet back up with Theresia?’

But at that point, Rudi let his guard down. He found his thoughts once more wandering to the incident at the harbor.

The fact that the boy called Michael had seen through him.

The fact that the boy could so easily overcome the past he himself could never overcome.

The moment he remembered, Rudi quietly got to his feet.

He howled in anguish, screaming as though calling to the ends of the earth.

And when his endless scream finally ceased,

The boy in the armor was weeping.



5章 緑の軍隊は静かに進行し

Chapter 5: The Green Army Marches Silently, and...

‘It’ had already infiltrated the island.

It crawled into the island’s depths, spreading its hands wide and thin.

And at that very moment, it opened its fists and reached out with its fingertips.

It was as though it was seeking to grasp something.

†

The front gates of Waldstein Castle.

“Mr. Mayor! A word, please. Are you visiting for the purpose of inspecting the site of the festivities?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Waldstein Castle is already our island’s pride and joy, but I wanted to personally examine the area to make sure that visitors to Growerth will not be disappointed.”

“Thank you, sir. We have quite a few reporters coming in from overseas; do you have any words for them?”

“Yes. As a resident of Growerth, I hope that the artist Carnald Strassburg will inspire you to learn even more about the history and culture of our island. And rest assured that we will spare no effort in making your experience a memorable one.”

The suit-clad man being interviewed by the reporter flashed a practiced smile at the cameras.

The area before the castle gates was packed and lively, and there were many news correspondents and their cameras dotting the crowds.

The courtyard, usually a place of solemn majesty, was today decorated with all sorts of trimmings. Spotlights were being set up one after another to illuminate the garden. Although the rehearsal had taken place several days ago, the lights had been taken down temporarily so that they would not get in the way of decorating the rest of the courtyard.

The castle, where Strassburg had worked as the court painter, was a treasure trove filled with his many works. This garden was also one such creation, and it was usually opened to the public.

The garden was clearly made to look pleasant, but it radiated a sense of energy rather than tranquility. It was because the festival organizers knew this well that they brought such extravagant lights to illuminate the castle, which was the center of the festivities.



The party was not exclusive to the castle, however. The people living in the city were also hard at work preparing for the festival. Shops, streets, and harbors were all decorated to match the celebrations.

The entire island was swept up in the excitement preceding the festival. Everything was leading up to the climactic opening ceremony that would take place that night.

But one of the reporters came up to the man in the suit and asked a rather downbeat question.

“There’s been reports about a commotion that took place in the harbor just earlier, Mr. Mayor...”

“...? I’m sorry to say that I haven’t been told of anything of the sort. But I will get confirmation as soon as I can. We’re doing everything in our power to make this a safe Carnale Festival, so I’d like to ask each and every person on this island to make public safety a priority.” The man in the suit said, and walked into the castle with his secretary in tow.

Once he was certain that no one else had followed them inside, he took out a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and replaced his glasses with them.

“...Shit. What’s this about the harbor? Hey. Call the cops and look into it.” He said to his secretary as he strode into a corner of the castle.

He stepped past a ‘No entry’ sign without so much as a moment’s hesitation. Suddenly, someone appeared before him.

“The viscount has been awaiting your arrival, Mayor.”

A maid dressed in green greeted him with a deep, formal bow, standing as though she had been therefrom the beginning of time.

“The master has graciously granted you permission for a brief audience. If you could come this way, sir.”

“Ha. ‘Graciously’ my ass. Like hell the count’d say something like that. Who do you think you are, putting words in your master’s mouth? Fucking bitch.”

The maid grinned.

“Please try to mind your manners, you freeloading dhampyr.”

“Whoa. What am I supposed to call that, racism? If you were talking to any other dhampyr, you’d have broken their heart so badly they’d have turned to dust on the spot.”

“Not to worry, Mayor. I wouldn’t dream of speaking this way to any other dhampyr. It’s only that looking at you compels me to wonder if even others of mixed heritage could be troublemakers like you. And so I ask that you please take your own life for the sake of the reputation of the others of your kind.”

The maid made no effort to hide her venom as she led the viscount’s guest through the stairs in the back.

Watt said nothing more, quietly following the maid with his secretary in tow.

Along the way, he blew his nose on a piece of tissue. He considered tossing it in the hallway, but he quickly changed his mind and threw it into a garbage bin in the corner of the hall.

“My, my! You’re being quite well-behaved today.” The maid exclaimed.

“Shaddap. I just didn’t feel like littering in the castle where I’ll be giving my opening ceremony speech. Today’s a pretty damn important day for me as the mayor. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here to say hello to the fucking count.”

Watt then went on to add, so quietly that not even the maid or his secretary could hear:

“…Even I’ve always had a soft spot for this festival.”

†

Watching Watt disappear into the castle, ‘it’ turned and walked away without so much as a sound.

Like a scout having located his target, it left the front lines in one smooth motion.

To be accurate, this place was not yet the front lines—at least, it would not be until evening.

It knew of the future to come. This was neither a prophecy nor a guess, but a plan.

“…Where in the world has Nidhogg gone? We must finish things here by evening and assemble together…” It wondered, taking out a cell phone.

It called someone on speed dial. The voice of the speaker came before the tone could even begin, as though they had been waiting for this call.

<Zygmunt?>

“Yes, Comrade Caldimir. Everything is going just as planned… Ah, from your voice, I judge that you have been injured in some way.”

<Nothing to worry about. It will heal quickly. Things are not unfolding quite the way I imagined on my end, but that matters not. Everything is still within my calculated margin of error. Now, Zygmunt the Green… I regret to inform you that several of our members are headed your way to stop you.>

Listening to the overly dramatic voice coming from the cell phone, ‘it’—Zygmunt the Green—nodded emotionlessly.

“What would you have me do if I am hindered, Comrade Caldimir?”

<Ignore it. If anyone gets in your way, silence them. The ones who’re headed for Growerth are those who have disobeyed me. Show them the foolishness of their ways. Teach them the futility of rebelling against one greater than themselves…>

“Understood, Comrade Caldimir.”

Zygmunt hung up and left the area as though nothing had ever happened.

Though the world at large was full of lively energy, Zygmunt alone was silent and tranquil, like the sound of falling snow.

The contrast was a stark one to behold, but the people were much too occupied with thoughts of the festival to ever notice the vampire in their midst.

Not one would notice.

Not one vampire,

And not even the long-lived viscount of Waldstein Castle.

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

Just as the mayor arrived at the castle, Val’s physical examination in the laboratory was coming to an end.

“...There. You may undo your illusion now.”

<Thanks for all your hard work!>

The two voices, coming from opposite ends of the spectrum of registers, prompted Val to slowly shake his consciousness awake.

Then, he used the consciousness of his soul to look upon his own body.

‘A... watermelon.’

He saw a watermelon.

It was circular and smooth with little holes cut in the sides in the shape of a face, just like a jack-o-lantern.

But those holes were not his real eyes. After all, what other explanation was there for his ability to observe them without the aid of a camera or a mirror?

And as though answering his questions, Doctor grinned and explained.

“Ah. From what Professor observes, your soul seems to already believe that your true form is humanoid. Have you noticed that the sights and sounds you observe are observed from a different vantage point than that of the watermelon? It is quite unusual for one to be able to observe one’s own body in such a way. Ah, yes. I’m quite envious, myself.”

“But… well, I’m not exactly proud of this body.”

At the moment, Valdred had undone all illusions and returned to his original form. His character, however, remained the same as his most recent form—the form of the young boy.

When Doctor first asked him to undo his illusion, Valdred had adamantly refused. But he was eventually coerced into following Doctor’s directions.

Of course, though the fact that the laboratory doors were now locked was also a contributing factor, what really changed Val’s mind was the fact that he had met Selim, a fellow plant-based vampire, and Professor, a creature who was more than a match for himself in terms of strangeness.

Thankfully, it was this Professor who did most of the hands-on work during the examination. Although Val had a complex about the fact that he looked so different from humans and vampires, it was somewhat comforting to have the even less human creature—the talking coffin—examine him, instead of Doctor.

Of course, a part of him was still quite uncomfortable with the situation.

The viscount had left through the vent earlier, saying something about greeting a guest. The sight of a mass of blood being sucked into the hole in the ceiling was terrifying to behold, leaving Val slightly shaken during the examination.

But to his surprise, Professor was quite steady with her hands. He was quickly freed from the examination table, wondering if that really was everything.

Before his CT scan and magnetic flux examination, he was given a physical examination and a small part of his skin was scraped off for analysis purposes. Although he felt no pain, his regeneration speed was slow for a vampire. His skin was only completely restored after the tests had ended.

After learning that radiation and magnetism did not do him much harm, he underwent many more tests. But Doctor and Professor made sure to never use needles.

“We have no idea where your weak points may lie. We can’t have you turning to ashes the moment we insert a single needle now, can we? Hoh hoh…”

<That would be scary! Fwoop!>

Now that he thought about it, Val realized that he had never really paid attention to his weaknesses in the past.

Because he was completely immune to sunlight and crucifixes, he only needed to protect himself by using his illusions and telekinesis to layer a human form over his main body to keep it safe.

A weak point.

The phrase finally hit Val in all its magnitude, sending a chill down his spine.

The thought of his own death had never occurred to him until then. But it was true that, as long as he was not protected by his illusions and telekinesis, he could be easily killed by something so weak as a single person's misstep.

There was no guarantee that he could be restored if he was smashed to bits. Although there was a chance that he could heal himself, he did not feel particularly inclined to test that theory. To do so would be like committing suicide to confirm the existence of an afterlife.

'I'm getting scared.'

He decided to take human form for now, drawing a veil of illusion around himself.

Returning to the form of a young boy, Val turned to Doctor and Professor.

"Hoh hoh. You've got quite the sense of fashion, young man."

<Oh… I can't see it. I'm sorry.>

Val smiled awkwardly at the disappointed Professor. Because she was a coffin with no eyes upon which he could project an illusion, she saw everything directly through her soul, just like the viscount.

But Val was used to having his form exposed to the viscount, and showing his form to Professor did not feel at all like showing it to a human being. He felt no discomfort in her ability to see him.

But the fact that Doctor had seen him through the security cameras meant that he had seen him in watermelon form all this time. Val could feel some sort of emotion—shame or anger, perhaps—welling up within.

'Wait, isn't that a breach of privacy, having hidden cameras all over the castle?! I can't believe nobody's complaining about it…'

Although he quietly complained to himself, Val took a seat in a nearby chair and waited for Doctor and Professor's diagnosis.

'Sure, I got the physical examination done like the viscount told me to. But what're they going to find out? Am I even going to get anything out of this?' He thought, zoning out. Doctor was examining the results of the tests, like X-ray images, while stroking some invisible beard in an almost comical fashion.

"…Now, about your results, young man. You have three options. A: Have me speak bluntly in a manner that is guaranteed to traumatize you. B: Have me sugarcoat the results and put your mind at ease whilst concealing the truth. Or C: Have me put on an inscrutable look as I say, '…there is a minor possibility'. Please, take your pick."

"…Well, I know I don't have anything to look forward to now."

"Hoh hoh hoh. It was a joke, young man. I'm no doctor; I feel no pangs of guilt about having a chuckle or two this way."

"I also know that you're one hell of a jerk. Actually, I've known that for a while now, I think."

Val was over his anger, now more desperate than anything else. He looked at Doctor with his most sympathetic expression yet; but the latter ignored him and kept his eyes trained on the pieces of paper that held the test results.

“Let me start with the conclusion: young man, among us vampires, you are indeed a rare breed.”

“A ‘rare breed’?”

“An invaluable individual. Only 0.001% of vampires share your physical traits.”

“Wait. You’re talking about watermelon vampires?”

The news did not make Val very happy. He felt less like a valuable being and more like a member of a minority group.

But Doctor shook his head, rejecting the notion.

“Not at all. Watermelon vampires are actually quite common, you see. There are many folktales surrounding such creatures, and many researchers study this field specifically, hypothesizing that there is something particularly remarkable about the Cucurbitaceae family of plants. I have even heard tales of a foolhardy researcher who rushed to the birthplace of that family—the Kalahari Desert—and ended up a desiccated husk. Of course, ‘common’ is a subjective term, considering that you are the first of this kind that I have ever encountered.”

“So what about me do you consider ‘rare’, anyway?”

“Ah, yes. Hm… Simply put, young man, your soul is a rather peculiar one. Plant-based vampires such as yourself have the general tendency to rely more on their souls than their bodies for their memories, emotions, and abilities. But in your case, an unusually high ratio of functions that are usually allocated to the physical body have instead been allocated to your soul. The fact that you are capable of seeing your own body from a different perspective is one such example. Even your vision relies on your soul. And do you not usually see your ‘self’ as a being with a human form?”

“Huh? Um… yes.”

The machines in the laboratory weren’t quite state-of-the-art, but they were of a scale so large that Val doubted that some hospitals could be equipped with such devices. And yet, in spite of the presence of such machines, Doctor did not hesitate to use the word ‘soul’ in his diagnosis. Although there was nothing strange about such a word coming from the viscount, hearing it again in that particular setting made the whole situation seem quite unscientific.

But Doctor was right—Val was not looking at himself from his physical body, but from something that surrounded it like a shell.

That ‘something’ was probably his soul. But as long as he was in a laboratory like this, Val would have preferred to hear a more scientific explanation.

As he lost himself in thought, there was a sudden flash as the lights in the room flared brightly, pouring powerful rays upon him all at once.

“Whoa! That’s too bright! What was that for?!” Val cried, bowing his head without so much as a thought. Doctor pressed a button to dim the lights and calmly continued his explanation.

“Hm. Now, I’ve had the chance to observe briefly. Judging from your physical reaction to that flash of light, including the near-instant shrinking of your pupils… Astounding. This body of yours, though an image of your soul formed through telekinesis, is intricate enough to recreate even the physical functions of your ocular organs. Such a case is thus far unheard of.”

“You could’ve at least warned me you were going to do that.” Val said, disgruntled. But though the sudden test bothered him, he decided to get his questions answered before anything else.

“So… I was curious. You keep talking about ‘souls’ and stuff, but I’m confused. What does that mean? Are souls kind of like ghosts?”

“Dear me… To think I would have to explain even that…” Doctor said, astounded. “Perhaps a soul is much like a ghost, or perhaps not. After all, even we vampires have yet to confirm the existence of ghosts or an afterlife. They may or may not exist. But in that sense, perhaps you are as close to one can get to becoming a ‘ghost’ than any other being.”

“What does that mean?”

There was nothing pleasant about hearing that he was very close to being a ghost. Val was anxious to find answers to the new question brought up by his first inquiry, but he patiently waited for Doctor’s explanation.

“Hoh hoh. Don’t rush me, now. Professor, do explain.”

As soon as Doctor finished, the coffin standing next to him chirped cheerfully.

<Yes, Doctor! Let me explain what a ‘soul’ is! Although we haven’t proved its existence quite yet, we vampires call the metamorphosis into ‘others’ like us an ‘evolution of the soul’. But you already know that, right?>

“I think I heard something similar from the viscount a while back. He drew up an evolutionary chart or something with his body.”

<The viscount loves that example! Well, it’s mostly accurate. And here’s the thing: a soul is kind of like an amalgamation of information! Here’s an example with the human brain. Memories are made in the hippocampus and the surrounding entorhinal cortex, the perirhinal cortex, the parahippocampal gyrus, and other parts of the brain, and are stored in the neocortex! Of course, that’s not getting into categories like declarative memory, procedural memory, and retrospective memory, but I won’t get into the details.>

“Right.”

The second part of Professor’s explanation flew straight over Val’s head. But he decided not to ask any questions, because he likely would not understand even if she gave him a more detailed explanation.

<So! A ‘soul’ is kind of like a ‘heart’ born from the consciousness, memories, emotions, and other functions of the brain. This ‘heart’ becomes a ‘soul’ when we treat it as an

amalgamation of information. If ghosts existed in this world, we could theorize that they're wandering pieces of information, who exist even without a body—which is where memories are usually stored. But this isn't only a matter of signals passing through synapses. Let me give you an example. Rumors are information, and they don't take on any physical form, right? It's the same way with the 'amalgamation of a consciousness's information'—what we vampires call a soul. It exists on a different plane than what's been proven by science! That's why it's such a hard topic to define.>

"...So it hasn't been proven yet, huh?"

<Nope. Although we know for a fact that we do have souls, even though there's so much we don't know about the bodies of vampires. The viscount is a living example!>

The image of the floating mass of blood flashed into Val's thoughts. He had never tried to find a scientific justification for the viscount's existence, however—the mere fact of his presence was always enough for Val to wave away the curiosity.

"And on that note, have you not noticed that your telekinetic powers are also an ability that is derived from your soul?"

"Oh..."

Doctor's comment led Val to think more on his own abilities.

His power to create illusions and use telekinesis to match the images was a skill he developed after a great deal of experimentation. But when he thought about it, that power matched no law of physics he knew of.

'Huh. So this "power of the soul" thing was closer than I thought.'

As he thought on the soul he now considered less valuable, he remembered what the viscount had told him earlier that day.

'I guess he was right. I never really made the effort to learn more about myself after all.'

But now that the examination he feared was over, Val felt at ease. Although no diagnosis would not hurt him, he began to feel as though he could overcome the troubles that they would pose him, one at a time.

And so, he turned to Doctor and Professor and got to the point.

"So, uh... what in the world am I? What is the real me?"

"Ah, I'd almost forgotten. Oh, yes. This laboratory was supposed to be the final stop in your search for answers. Of course."

<It's good to be young!>

"Sorry but could you not talk like that it's really annoying." Val complained quickly, but he agreed that he was indeed quite young. If he were able to think more calmly about things, such problems would not bother him in the first place.

But he could not hold back his emotions. He wasn't yet able to heal his own inferiority complex.

That was why Val had tried to find the answers from others. Because he had no idea who he really was, he had been trying to learn about his place to be from other people.

His consultation with Doctor and Professor was, in some sense, a comical one to behold. But Doctor's laughter soon faded as he continued in a serious voice.

"Hm… Young man, what is the conclusion that *you* want to hear?"

"What?"

He had come to this laboratory to find the answer to that very question. And now the question was being addressed to himself.

But Val wasn't particularly upset. After all, he had never really tried to answer the question himself.

"What do you mean?"

"You want to find the 'real you'—no. You want a 'self' that has been tainted by no one. But young man, what will you do? If there was indeed a way to take hold of a new self—a self unaffected by any other—would you choose to take it?"

"…If it helps me not feel inferior, yeah." Val said solemnly, without giving the words much thought.

Doctor shook his head, troubled.

"To be perfectly frank with you, young man, there *is* a method by which a soul like yours may be cleansed and its memories erased."

"Th-then…"

"But, you see… To forget the past is to kill your past self, and the self alone. From the perspective of an outsider, you are still alive. And your new self may end up living under the shadow of your former self."

Although Doctor was speaking half-jokingly before, he for once grew serious and composed. Val was taken aback by the sudden change, but this was no time to be complaining, he told himself.

In spite of his apparent youth, Doctor's expression was the very picture of gravity. Val felt like he was being crushed under the weight of his gaze.

"Would you willingly make that choice? If you do, you will indeed get the chance to live on as an untainted, singular individual, affected only by the environment of your new life. But to do so is also to kill completely your current self. Humans and vampires would find the afterlife awaiting them after their deaths. But if you choose to erase your memories, the you who stands here will disappear without a trace. Your heart and memories will not reach the afterlife, as your body remains alive."

Val could not find the words to retort. Although he did want to change the self he hated so much, if even the self that despised himself were to be lost, would the cleansing not be the same as oblivion?

“Then…”

Knowing that he was running out of options, Val nervously spoke up.

“Then… what am I supposed to do? I… I can’t just stop here! I can’t just wait and see what happens!”

“There, there. Young people these days! Not an ounce of patience to be had. Young man, I haven’t even gotten to the most important part. The part where I answer that question about your identity.”

“Huh?” Val gasped, his eyes opening wide.

<Yes! Let me explain. There’s one big thing about souls, you see? For example, when a human being becomes a vampire, their ‘self’ affects their physical forms via the soul! It’s the ultimate form of evolution. For information to affect the physical realm… the placebo effect has nothing on on this! I’m talking about the thing that lets vampires turn even their clothing into bats and fog, or allow vampires to fly through the air!> The coffin exclaimed, proudly twisting her body side-to-side.

<The viscount gave me this analogy: for vampires, the soul might be a remote control that controls the body via the heart, which acts as the receiver! And in your case, Val, your body and your consciousness—that is, your soul—is already ninety percent separate from each other! This is very unusual! Even in the viscount’s case, his soul is completely bound to all of his blood. So if the blood freezes or dries up, he loses consciousness. So if you compare normal vampires to remote-controlled cars, you’re closer to being an independent robot, Val!>

Val tilted his head, still not understanding any of the explanation. But Doctor chimed in to add to Professor’s lecture.

“In other words, as a result of our examination, we found that your watermelon body has no physical function whatsoever. To be blunt, if you choose to believe, you would be completely unharmed even if someone should smash that watermelon.”

“…What?”

‘Wait, what? So… my real body is the watermelon, but… it’s not?’

“Um, Doctor?! What does that mean?! That can’t be right. I *know* my main body affects me! I start feeling unhealthy if I don’t get any sunlight, and—”

<That’s only because your soul thinks so! It’s convinced you that you need sunlight to survive. It’s like self-induced hypnotism! Your watermelon form heals itself because you *believe* that it’s your real body, so your soul unconsciously alters your form to match your image of the watermelon.>

“Wait, wait. I lost you.”

‘In other words, what I thought was me actually wasn’t me, but the me that’s thinking this is actually me? What?’

“…Hm. I’m afraid we may be overloading you with all this information. In any case, that watermelon still functions as a psychological core of sorts for you. It will be in your best interests, young man, to safeguard it for the time being. After all, casting it aside too suddenly may cause your psyche to collapse.”

Val spent the next few minutes with his head on the desk, thinking all sorts of thoughts. But he eventually turned to Doctor, exhausted, and feebly asked:

“Doctor? So… if I’m not a watermelon, then… then what in the world *am* I?”

“Who can say?”

“Wha-?!”

Doctor’s answer was too straightforward for Valdred’s liking. The latter’s illusionary face paled.

“All we can tell you for certain is that you do indeed exist before us. And as for the rest, to borrow a younger man’s words… ‘That’s none of my business’.”

“But… even my sense of self was gathered from other vampires. So… even though I don’t like being a watermelon, I always thought that it was the real me, at least… Oh, man… I mean, I’m not really badly shocked or anything, but I guess… uh… I guess I really didn’t enjoy being a watermelon after all. Uh. Huh? Wait, I’m sorry. I’m so confused.”

As Val rambled on in self-analysis in spite of his downcast mood, Doctor mumbled something about him being high-maintenance and suggested an answer.

“Regarding your memories and sense of self, young man, I frankly can’t offer you any solution but the one I mentioned earlier—a complete cleansing. But if it’s that body of yours that bothers you, then that is a different story altogether. Hoh hoh hoh… After all, if you truly put your mind to it, you could even metamorphose that watermelon into a human form.”

“Metamorphose?”

“In the case of plant-based vampires such as yourselves, they obviously do not start out in anything resembling a human form. But there are some among them who compel themselves to evolve into human-like shapes. I sincerely hope you weren’t expecting such a change to come about naturally, young man. But in any event, the soul is capable of bringing change to one’s physical form in the span of less than one generation, consciously or not.”

‘From plants to humans?’

Val had, over the past several years, failed to alter his watermelon body. So was such a thing really possible?

But just as he began to ask, he remembered a living example he had encountered on the way to the lab.

“…Like Selim?”

<Yes! Miss Selim was originally a vampire shaped like an ordinary flower. But she slowly changed her form to look like a human girl!>

The moment Professor finished her sentence, Val leapt off his seat and ran for the door.

“Um, thank you for everything today, Doctor! Professor!”

And without even waiting for an answer, he opened the door and sprinted away.

Although Doctor and Professor had no idea what kind of an expression Val was wearing, they could see that he was now motivated to move forward.

Watching Val leave, Doctor grumbled to himself.

“My word. And without even taking the time to hear the rest of his diagnosis.”

<It’s so wonderful that he’s all energetic again!>

In contrast to Doctor’s sullen tone, Professor sounded nothing short of ecstatic.

Listening to Professor’s cheerful voice, Doctor put his lips to the cup of tea on his desk. He downed the tepid drink in one go, and said to himself what he had been planning to tell Valdred.

“Young man… you are more special than you realize.”

Doctor, a vampire who sought eternity, sounded truly concerned for the boy’s future.

“You will only be able to die when you desire death, and have evolved your body to be capable of such a thing. In other words, until that time comes, you will never die. After all, no one yet knows how to destroy a soul.”

And he added, in an incredibly envious tone:

“If Relic is a ‘standard’ created by the combination of countless vampiric traits—a Relict—then Val, you are an ‘invincible’. After all, you are not even a vampire.”

<-ctor…? Doctor? Doctor?>

“What is it?”

<You’ve been talking to yourself for a while now. Is everything okay?>

“…Oh. Yes. I’m fine.”

Doctor smiled awkwardly and chuckled.

“I was saying… because we vampires are so difficult to kill, we fear death even more than humans do.”

†

Waldstein Castle, residential area. Parlor.

[Yes! We vampires may be powerful beings, but we are at the same time possessed of many weaknesses! That is why, in the distant past, I joined a community of those intent on protecting vampires. Unworthy as I may be, I was granted the honor of acting as chairman to many of our meetings. But alas, duty called me back to my homeland of Growerth, for I was tasked with the responsibility of officially succeeding my adoptive father. Though Caldimir questioned me, asking, 'Which do you value more, your friends, or your people?', I answered that I valued both, but that I trusted my friends to do everything in their power to make the world a better place. And that is how I left the Organization and]

"I don't remember asking for a history lesson, Count." Watt said with a wave of the hand, slouching on the parlor sofa. His feet were on the marble coffee table, shoes and all, and he stubbornly carried himself like a man sprawling out in his own living room.

The female vampire next to him was trembling, her head bowed as she shrank into the sofa with an obvious look of fear.

[Ah, but was it not you who asked to hear about the Organization's exploits? If you are here in the role of the mayor, perhaps you could act with a smidgen more courtesy to match the weight of your responsibilities.]

"Like hell. How am I supposed to act all house-trained when I'm basically sitting in an acid bath? What's with all the lecturing, Count?"

[I am a viscount, Mayor.]

At the center of the parlor were Watt, his secretary, and the trembling pool of blood. But they were not the only ones in the room.

Four maids dressed in green were each standing in one corner of the room, cautiously glaring at Watt as though daring him to try something. And in the shadows of the pillars of the large parlor were the castle's werewolves, already in wolf-form and standing by to react to any show of hostility.

"This welcome of yours is so fucking warm I could make coffee with it. So why *is* the guy who's supposed to be Growerth's Master of Night acting all chicken-shit in front of a no-good petty villain, anyway?"

[I assure you, I insisted that I would not need their protection for today's meeting. But it seems that the residents of my castle are unnecessarily guarded around you. If you turn this around, of course, that would mean that this is the degree to which they fear your power. Is it not something of which you can be proud? But it is indeed true that this is no atmosphere for a gentlemen's conversation. I shall have them clear the parlor.]

After the long-winded speech, the viscount made to signal the maids and the werewolves to leave. But Watt stopped him.

“Never mind. We can keep rolling like this. We’ve come this far, so I might as well let all of you hear why I asked ‘bout the Organization.” Watt said brusquely, taking out a crumpled piece of paper from his suit pocket.

It was the short letter that Melhilm had sent him.

When the viscount finished reading the letter, his entire body shook in waves as it drew excited letters in the air.

[My word! To think that Melhilm had survived!]

“...You look happy.”

[Is there a reason as to why I shouldn’t be? Ah, so Miss Shizune hadn’t devoured him whole after all! To think that my old friend is still alive... I foresee a wonderful Carnale Festival this year. Ah, yes.]

“Why don’tcha come back once you’ve learned to read, Count?” Watt said, anxiously kicking the table.

The teacups teetered over and fell. Tea spilled onto the table. But the viscount, seemingly unconcerned, calmly wrote out another series of words for Watt.

[But is it not true that you and Miss Shizune are guilty of having attempted to murder him? I must say that this threat is not entirely undeserved. What goes around comes around. Or perhaps you could call it karma.]

“...”

[And of course, if I were to find that my old friend has gone so mad that he would involve innocents, I would do everything in my power to stop him. And should he make an attempt at Relic, then I would also plainly refuse him.]

Though the viscount’s statement was not illogical, it did not give Watt a very meaningful answer. Watt, clearly tired of trying to nitpick at every one of the viscount’s tangents, changed the subject.

“As if I’d want help from the likes of you. Listen up, Count. I’m gonna put Melhilm out of his fucking misery. So don’t get in my way.”

[Though I would like to point out the nonsensicality in asking a man to stand by idly as his friend is murdered, I must inform you that carrying out your plan will only lead to your permanently turning the Organization against yourself.]

Watt laughed defiantly.

“Well, then? I say, bring it on! That’s why I’m here begging you for information in the first place.”

[I fear you may need to take some time to meditate upon the meaning of the word ‘beg’, Mayor.]

Each time Watt stepped across the line of formality, the chill in the air grew stronger. And when the air grew colder, his secretary trembled even more. The viscount, alone free from the cycle, tried to continue his conversation with Watt without caring for the reactions of those around him.

[Ah, in any event, as I mentioned earlier, I have little to do with the Organization now. In fact, in more recent years, I've had no contact whatsoever with their members, even for personal reasons… Ah, pardon. I apologize! I'd forgotten that I frequently play massively multiplayer online role-playing games alongside Garde the Black as party members. Garde slipped my mind, as this friend of mine rarely participates in the Organization's meetings, in spite of being an officer.]

"…Never heard of him."

[Hm? You have never heard of Garde Ritzberg, the Black Gravekeeper? The dark destroyer who ravenously devours corpses of all affiliations at the front lines of every war and conflict, feared even by fellow vampires?]

"How am I supposed to know? And what kinda superhero name is that, anyway? Or is this buddy of yours tryin' to become a professional wrestler in America? Black Graveshit his ring name or something?" Watt said, astonished. The viscount looked troubled by his attitude.

[Ah, so I see you have knowledge of but a few of the Organization's officers. Hm… You see, the Organization bestows upon each officer a moniker connected to a color. For instance, I was once known to them as Gerhardt the Red Pool of Blood.]

"Full points for creativity."

[Ah, you do not find it a particularly likable name, then? Personally, I'm quite proud of the way it sounds. Rather like some secret agent from a piece of Japanese animation.]

Watt ignored the viscount's comment and glared, silently urging him to get the conversation back on track. Although the viscount was not particularly intimidated, he nonetheless continued to discuss the other officers of the Organization.

[I suppose I should begin with the one I presume is the current leader of the Organization, Caldimir the Blue. Then there is Bridgestone the Yellow, Ishibashi the Indigo… and outside of Rainbow, we have Rude the Gold, Mars the Silver, Yamada the Pearl…]

The viscount listed off the names of one officer after another, but stopped partway through and changed to a more serious font, giving Watt a piece of advice.

[I will cite the officer Zygmunt the Green as one reason why it is in your best interests to at least remain in good standing with the Organization.]

"…Who's that?"

[Ah, listen well, Mayor. This vampire is one that you, as mayor, should never hope to face as an enemy. That is because—]

†

[—my sincerest apologies, but as today is the first day of the Carnale Festival, I must receive many more guests today.]

After a discussion of the officers of the Organization, and granting official permission for the castle's use during the festival, the viscount apologetically ended the conversation.

[As a citizen under your care, Mayor, I wish great success upon this year's Carnale Festival.]

"If you've got time to be making wishes, why don'tcha lend us a hand like the other hardworking citizens here?" Watt said, getting off his seat and leaving the parlor, emphatically stomping down on the carpet.

When he opened the parlor door, he saw a girl standing before him.

'Ferret? That's not right.'

She was a total stranger.

The skinny girl, dressed in humble clothes, gave him a light nod and stepped into the parlor as though in his place.

Watt left the room, the sound of the maids closing the door ringing behind him, as he continued to ponder how he could get the better of the viscount next time.

†

'It' continued to encroach upon the island in total silence.

Over great distances, spreading out thin.

As far as its hands could reach.

Little by little—

†

"Fucking Count. Slithering around without a fucking clue how good he has it." Watt spat anxiously as he descended the slope. He had elected to take the back door out the castle and down the deserted hill in order to avoid showing his anxiety to the cameras camped out in the courtyard.

Suddenly, his secretary's cell phone rang.

"Hello? Yes. Yes... Oh..."

Ignoring the secretary, Watt continued walking down the path alone. She was probably discussing something related to work or the opening ceremony that was to begin in several hours' time.

However, from the tone of her voice, Watt soon realized that her conversation was much more serious than he initially believed.

“…What’s wrong.” He asked, stopping in place and turning.

The secretary hung up and reported the contents of her conversation with a mystified look.

“I’ve been told that the incident at the harbor has left some injured. There seems to be a great deal of information flying around at the moment, but we’ve confirmed that things are now moving as usual in the harbor.”

“…Tch. So we still haven’t caught the son of a bitch who decided to go rabid on us.”

“Also, sir… City Hall received a strange phone call asking for you.” The secretary said, looking even more bemused. Watt impatiently raised his voice.

“*I’ll* decide if it was strange or not. Tell me what it was about.”

“Oh! Yes, sir. The phone call was from a martial arts dojo in the city. A man calling himself Traugott left a message for you: ‘I’m taking care of a friend of the mayor, badly injured. Please send help’.”

A martial arts dojo and a man named Traugott. Watt frowned at the mention of both. The dojo was a municipal facility where students learned martial arts like karate or judo. The man called Traugott was, essentially, the master of the dojo. He was a skilled warrior who participated in many international competitions, and he was awarded honorary citizenship at Neuberg several years ago. Watt remembered clearly because he was the one to award it to the man. It was also rumored that Traugott had entered the tournament that took place at Waldstein Castle last year, not budging an inch in the face of his vampire opponents.

“Ol’ Traugott said that? …A friend of mine?”

“I’ve been told that her name was… Kijima Shizune…”

‘So it was Shizune, huh.’

The pieces fell into place.

‘Hah. And I was so sure she was sticking to homeless life all this time. I get it now. Other than the count, there aren’t many people on Growerth who know Japanese.’

Ignoring the fact that he himself was one such person, Watt continued to reason out Shizune’s situation.

‘Yeah. There’s Japanese people attending that dojo, and Traugott’s trained in China and Japan. Makes sense. So what, has he been feeding her all this time?’

But that was not the problem now. The fact that she had been injured—grievously enough that Traugott took the time to give him a phone call—meant that she was likely in critical condition.

That led Watt to a single answer.

“So you made it in time for the festival. Eh, Melhilm?”

He did not care an ounce for the fact that Shizune—the strongest of the cards in his hand—was incapacitated.

Watt grinned menacingly, his hands curled tightly into fists.

As though he was excited for the prospect of facing this powerful new threat.

However, Watt never realized that far overhead, over the mountain path at the back of the castle, a flock of bats were in flight.

The bats glanced at Watt, but ignored him and flew towards Waldstein Castle.

The bats had human eyes.

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The Execution grounds.

He remembered the beautiful sight that had greeted him that morning. The beautiful vampire who was once a flower.

Wanting to see her once more, Val returned to the execution grounds to be greeted by a somewhat different Selim.

She had minimized the size of the flower and vines that were wrapped up around her lower body. She was reading a book, leaning against the guillotine.

Despite the great difference in scale from before, she was still a stunning sight to behold—as least, that was Val's honest opinion.

In a corner was a pile of vampires who looked to be recovering from strangulation, slightly detracting from the pristine beauty of the scene. But Val decided to pretend he hadn't noticed them.

His admiration for Selim was directed at her entire body, including the great flower and the vines, but he thought that even the girl that made up her upper body was quite lovely. Of course, that particular opinion was likely from the character of another vampire that had been injected into him.

Although his current form was just an illusion, Doctor and Professor had told him that even the watermelon—his main body—had no significance.

'Then what in the world am I?'

Wanting to find answers to his question, Val decided that his first course of action should be to ask for the story of the girl who had changed herself from a flower to a human.

But how should he ask her?

If he were to come out and directly ask her ‘Why did you decide to look like a human girl?’, he might end up hurting her feelings in one way or another. He stood there, rooted to the spot, unable to think of any sensitive way to parse the question.

In the meantime, Selim seemed to have noticed his presence. She put down her book and flashed him a gentle smile.

“Uh…”

Now it would be even harder for him to ask such a personal question.

‘If only I were someone really brave. Someone who’d never be intimidated by anything…’

Selim watched as the boy before her underwent an incredible transformation.

Val’s body stretched vertically. His boyish features grew sharper, and a pair of sunglasses popped up over his eyes. Even his clothing changed—he was wearing a skull-print T-shirt and a leather jacket.

It was an unfamiliar face to Selim. But to Val, it was the form of the strongest, most brazen person he knew—Watt Stalf.

“Hey. Let’s talk.”

His attitude did a 180 as he strode towards Selim. Although Val thought that borrowing someone else’s character at a time like this was about as counterproductive as it got to his quest to find himself, he did not care. After all, even his character had become close to that of Watt.

“Oh, yes…?”

“Don’t get *scared*. You know I can transform, right?”

“Um… Yes.”

Selim nodded, still slightly confused. Val approached her and put an arm around her shoulder without a moment’s hesitation. The guillotine she had been leaning on, he found, was surprisingly cold. There was a chill around them.

‘Now, where should I start…’

“You’re amazing, Valdred. You can transform into anything you want…”

Val realized that his character hadn’t quite entirely changed to Watt’s. He had remained silent for long enough that Selim had started the conversation.

“I’m a little jealous. To be able to change into so many looks and personalities so easily…”

Although her words could have sounded sarcastic depending on the tone, there was nothing but pure wonder in her voice. However, that only served to embarrass Val and drove him to quickly change the subject.

“Then what about you?”

“Yes?”

“…I just heard from the doc. He said you didn’t always look this way. Dunno if you changed yourself ‘cause you wanted to or not, but… I-if you know why you did, then tell me.”

His tone was too gentle for Watt, but Selim had no way of knowing that.

She hesitated for a moment, but soon put on a sad smile as she slowly spoke.

“It’s… admiration.”

“Admiration?” Val repeated. Selim nodded and continued.

“My form… is something I admire. It’s… also my dream.”

“What’s that mean?” Val asked, approaching the truth. But at that moment—

“AAAAAAAAACK!”

They were interrupted by a sudden intruder.

“Master Watt! Master Watt! What are you doing here?!”

A childlike voice echoed in the execution grounds. Then, fog began to gather by the guillotine.

Not a moment later, the fog took material form before Val and Selim, and changed into the form of a girl in her mid-teens who was dressed like a jester.

“No no no no no! Even an adorable girl like you has no right to sweet-talk Master Watt, Selim!” She cried, repeatedly pounding on Selim’s shoulders. The latter stood there in shock, but Val hurriedly turned back into the form of a young boy.

“Y-you idiot! It’s me! Val!”

The moment she realized the truth, the jester froze. Her face turned so red that the flush was visible through her makeup.

“…Um. So s-s-s-so no? D-did I get the wrong person? Oh. Oh. Oh. Selim. I am *so sorry*!”

The jester shook her head left and right, apologized to Selim, and proceeded to turn her fury on Val.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid Val! Even I admit that Selim is adorable, but you can’t turn into Master Watt to flirt with her! That’s cheating!”

“No, no! You’ve got the wrong idea…” Val said, trying to fend off the jester’s punches.

Selim watched the scene unfold, still not understanding fully what was going on. But once the jester finally began to calm down, Selim joined the conversation.

“Um… is something the matter? It’s unusual for you to be up so early in the evening.”

It was only then that Val realized it was evening. He hadn't noticed because he had been underground all day, but the examinations must have taken longer than he thought.

"Hm? Oh, yeah! You know, the Carnale Festival starts tonight! Tee hee! I was so excited I couldn't get a wink of sleep, so I was taking a teensy stroll around the cave! Master Watt is going to come to the opening ceremony, you know? As the mayor! So I'm going to hide somewhere he can't find me, and then throw sparkly confetti all around him! Tee hee hee!"

The embarrassment and confusion from thirty seconds ago had already left the childlike jester, having been replaced with admiration for Watt and innocent excitement for the coming festivities.

Selim smiled at the jester's joy, but there was something lonely in her look, Val thought.

"Aww, why's everyone sleeping in a corner like that? Those slowpokes! Master Watt's going to give his opening ceremony speech really soon!"

The jester noticed the unconscious vampires lying in a heap in a corner of the execution grounds. She went up to them to take them aboveground to the party.

Val said nothing, instead turning towards Selim. He was certain that there was something downcast in her eyes.

"...Hey."

"Oh? ...Oh! Yes?"

Val had taken Selim by surprise. She quickly straightened up and looked at him.

Val intended to continue the conversation from before the jester's intrusion. However, another question rose to his lips before he could stop himself.

"Do you want to go see the festival?"

"What?"

It was such a direct question that the flower and vines that composed Selim's lower body shook.

'It was pretty obvious you wanted to go, you know.' Val thought, suppressing a chuckle. Selim's eyes swam as she waved her hands before her face, her cheeks beet red.

"I-I couldn't do that! I-if something like me showed up in front of humans, they'd notice me instantly! And then... that would end up making things difficult for everyone else who lives here, too... That's why I can't leave this place. Wait! But I don't mind at all! Really! Melina is in the lake here, and Doctor and Professor always lend me books to read... And, um..."

'She really is easy to read.'

Despite the fact that Selim was likely much older than himself, there was something quite adorable about her, Val thought. At the same time, he found himself angry at the circumstances that forced her to hide underground.

‘I’m free to go to the festival even though I’m not looking forward to it that much. But Selim… she doesn’t even have a choice.’

And so, he took a moment to think. And once he took hold of an idea, he did not even consider it before sharing it with Selim.

“Let’s go.”

“What?”

“You want to go to the Carnale Festival, right?”

“Oh? Um, yes. Yes. But… um… you see, I…”

As Selim stuttered in confusion, Val held out his hand.

‘I get it. She must have been down because I didn’t think about how she felt before coming up to her and asking her questions like that. If only I could do something for Selim in exchange for getting her story…’

Although his intentions were quite selfish, Val did not realize that he had held out his hand before even deciding on his selfish intentions.

“Let’s go.”

“But everyone will notice…”

“Notice what?”

“…?!”

Selim followed Val’s gaze downward, and stopped at her lower body.

In place of the petals and vines that were a part of her body, there was a skirt over a pair of legs—and the skirt was designed in a way that it was a perfect match for her top.

“???”

Selim fixed her glasses, taken aback by the sudden disappearance of most of her lower body. But no matter how many times she looked again, her familiar lower body was gone.

She tried wriggling her vines. She could still feel them, no different in any way from before. They were merely invisible.

“I can use my illusions to make clothes and stuff as long as it’s within range. So I tried covering your lower body with an illusion. Um… my power doesn’t reach too far, though. So I guess the only problem is you have to stick by really close to me.”

“…”

Selim did not respond. She was staring at her lower body, speechless. Val began to wonder if he had done something to hurt her feelings.

“W-wait! Huh? Oh! Right! Uh, just because I’m casting an illusion doesn’t mean I’m touching your legs or anything like that! Or maybe you don’t really want to walk next to a boy? I know! I can transform into a girl! Like… a girl who looks just like you, so we can even pretend to be twins!” He stuttered, desperately trying to remain in Selim’s good graces.

But Selim’s reaction was a shy smile, accompanied by a slight bow of the head.

“…Thank you, Val. You’re such a kind person.”

“Huh? …Uh, not really, but…”

Val wasn’t used to being thanked. He averted his gaze, blubbering incoherently.

He found himself face-to-face with the jester.

“WHOA!”

“Hee hee hee! Did I surprise you? Did I surprise you? I was totally surprised, you know? Val, you’re such a ladykiller! See? You didn’t even have to pretend to be Master Watt this time! Oh, you charmer, you!”

She jokingly elbowed his chest, wearing an impish grin. Val no longer had the energy to protest (and he was quite certain that the jester knew this well), so he listened quietly with a tired chuckle.

“But you know, Master Watt’s still the best! Tee hee!”

†

Neuberg City Hall. The Mayor’s office.

There was a loud sneeze in the office, occupied by none but its owner.

“…Shit. Is it all the flowers at the venue?”

There were two hours left until the opening ceremonies. Watt was reviewing his speech, dressed impeccably and wearing the face of a mayor.

“…It’s annoying enough having to give the count’s place *compliments*, but I gotta win some points with the people here…”

Remembering that the municipal elections were scheduled for next year, Watt quietly began to practice his speech.

He had sent his secretary to Shizune earlier. She should have arrived at the dojo by now, provided that driving conditions were decent. Although he did consider going personally, he could not allow himself to abandon his duties as a mayor.

He read through the speech over and over again, and once he was satisfied that there were no errors, he opened the door to head to the venue of the opening ceremonies.



“Good evening, Mayor.”

A familiar voice and a microphone.

A man had been waiting in front of Watt’s office. He was of a nondescript height and build, and had a somewhat morose look about him.

It was the man who had interviewed Watt earlier in the day at Waldstein Castle.

“Do you have any comments about the incident at the harbor?”

“...Sir, if you’d like an interview, I’m afraid you’ll have to follow official procedures.” Watt said, feigning ignorance. He passed by the reporter, ignoring him. But the reporter then spoke to his back, his voice brimming with hostility.

“So you would abandon your pet Eater, Mayor?”

“...Who are you.”

The mayor instantly cast aside his mask and slowly turned to the reporter.

Receiving a look that conveyed even bloodlust, the reporter continued speaking in a completely different tone from before.

“Perhaps you would understand if I told you that I am a friend of Melhilm’s.”

It was a surprisingly quick answer. Watt kept his foe’s nonchalance in mind as he shot back, equally casual:

“So you’re so sick of Melhilm that you decided to come join me. I gotta say, good choice. I’ll at least keep you alive as a reward.”

The reporter, without so much as a single reaction to Watt’s condescending comment, spoke plainly and mechanically.

“Watt Stalf... I have been told that you are a man who values his worthless pride more than his own life. And so, I have decided to take special measures against you.”

“...I don’t know what you’re up to, you piece of shit, but you could at least have the courtesy to tell me your name.”

Watt had meant to display his own lack of fear with his utterance.

But the moment the reporter answered him, his nonchalance was shattered.

“I am Zygmunt the Green.”

“...!”

The human blood flowing in Watt’s veins allowed a chill to run down his spine. He broke into cold sweat.

The vampire the viscount had warned him about—the one he should never turn against him—had, of all things, sided with Melhilm and come to Growerth as his enemy.

“Ah… From your reaction, I assume that you have heard of me.”

“…Picked up a couple things here and there.”

“I see… So you understand. You know, then, that my presence here already spells your defeat.”

Watt listened in horror as he recounted the viscount’s description of Zygmunt from earlier that day.

[By the act of biting a human being, you see, a vampire may cause one of three things to occur. First is the drinking of blood, the second is the subjugation of the human, and the third is the turning of the human. Now, let me explain why this vampire—Zygmunt the Green Army—is your proverbial silver bullet. Why there would be no greater foe than Zygmunt for you, Mayor, on this isolated island.]

“I’m dying of old age here, Count. Hurry up.”

[Though Zygmunt has great difficulty in turning humans, in exchange this vampire is capable of subjugating humans with terrifying efficiency. How? Zygmunt’s own blood, of course! Once a human is administered with this blood in any form]

“Hey, my—I mean, the Clown that’s staying with you—she’s a freaking master when it comes to subjugation—”

But the viscount plainly laid out the facts before him.

Watt deflated. The words bore down upon him as though they carried weight.

[Zygmunt’s blood, you see, is capable of airborne infection.]

†

“All right. Let’s go.”

“But… is this really all right? If you have to be beside me all the time, you won’t be able to enjoy the festival, Val.”

Though Selim was clearly bursting with excitement, she could not bring herself to go. Val smiled, trying to clear her worries.

“It’s okay. I wasn’t really planning to do much at the festival anyway. But I thought maybe it would be more fun if I went with someone.”

“But…”

“…So could I ask you this favor? Could you come to the festival with me? I mean, there’s a bunch of things that I want to talk to you about, too.”

‘Right. I’m not doing this for Selim. This is for me, too.’

Convincing himself that he had ulterior motives for taking Selim aboveground, Valdred kept talking to her. He would help her enjoy the festival and take in the sights of the outside world.

How did this fellow plant-based vampire see the world, in contrast to humans and vampires? Perhaps she could provide Val with the answers he sought. And with that thought, he gently took her hand in his.

And little by little, he escorted the girl to the outside world.

As he held the humanlike hand, so very warm in his, Val began to feel his heart grow warmer as well.

†

“So what? If you’re here to kill me, why’d you go to the trouble of telling me your name?”

“That is because our master, Comrade Caldimir, did not make your death a part of his plan. In fact, he plans to make use of you. Although I cannot speak on Melhilm’s behalf.”

“…And you think I’m gonna do whatever you shits tell me to do? What do you think I am, some vampire’s retarded lapdog?”

Zygmunt shook his head.

“The opposite. Comrade Caldimir has high hopes for you. Though you may be a petty man, you would never abandon your subordinates or citizens unless you intended to use them as tools to begin with.”

“…”

“Doubtless you would not wish to bear witness to the sight of your citizens killing one another one by one, as journalists from all over the world capture the scene in their cameras and reports.”

Watt ground his teeth at the nonchalant threat.

“Son of a bitch… Not like *I* have any right to say this, but do you really want Relic’s powers that badly?”

Though he had not intended for such a thing, Watt’s sore comment drew out new information from Zygmunt.

“…No. Our true target is not Relic. In that alone you may take solace.”

“What…?”

“After his discussion with Melhilm, Comrade Caldimir discovered a vampire even more useful to his plans than Relic von Waldstein. A being with unlimited potential—potential for immortality and invincibility.”

Watt frowned at Zygmunt, not knowing who he might be talking about. Zygmunt chuckled and revealed his goals.

“Melhilm’s letter must have spelled everything out for you already. He is here to take back *everything*.”

†

“Let’s start with the opening ceremonies. I think the jester girl was going to do something funny there, too.”

“Oh, yes! That sounds wonderful.”

Selim climbed the stairs leading aboveground. The smile plastered on her face grew even brighter.

And Val once again found himself seeing her as nothing short of ‘lovely’.

‘This feeling… if all of my souls agree on this one emotion, then maybe this is what the real me is feeling.

‘Then maybe I could use this feeling as my core. Something to base my real self on.’

Excited at the possibilities that lay ahead, Val energetically stepped aboveground.

Although that wasn’t the only prospect he was excited for, he had yet to realize what the other thrilling possibility was.

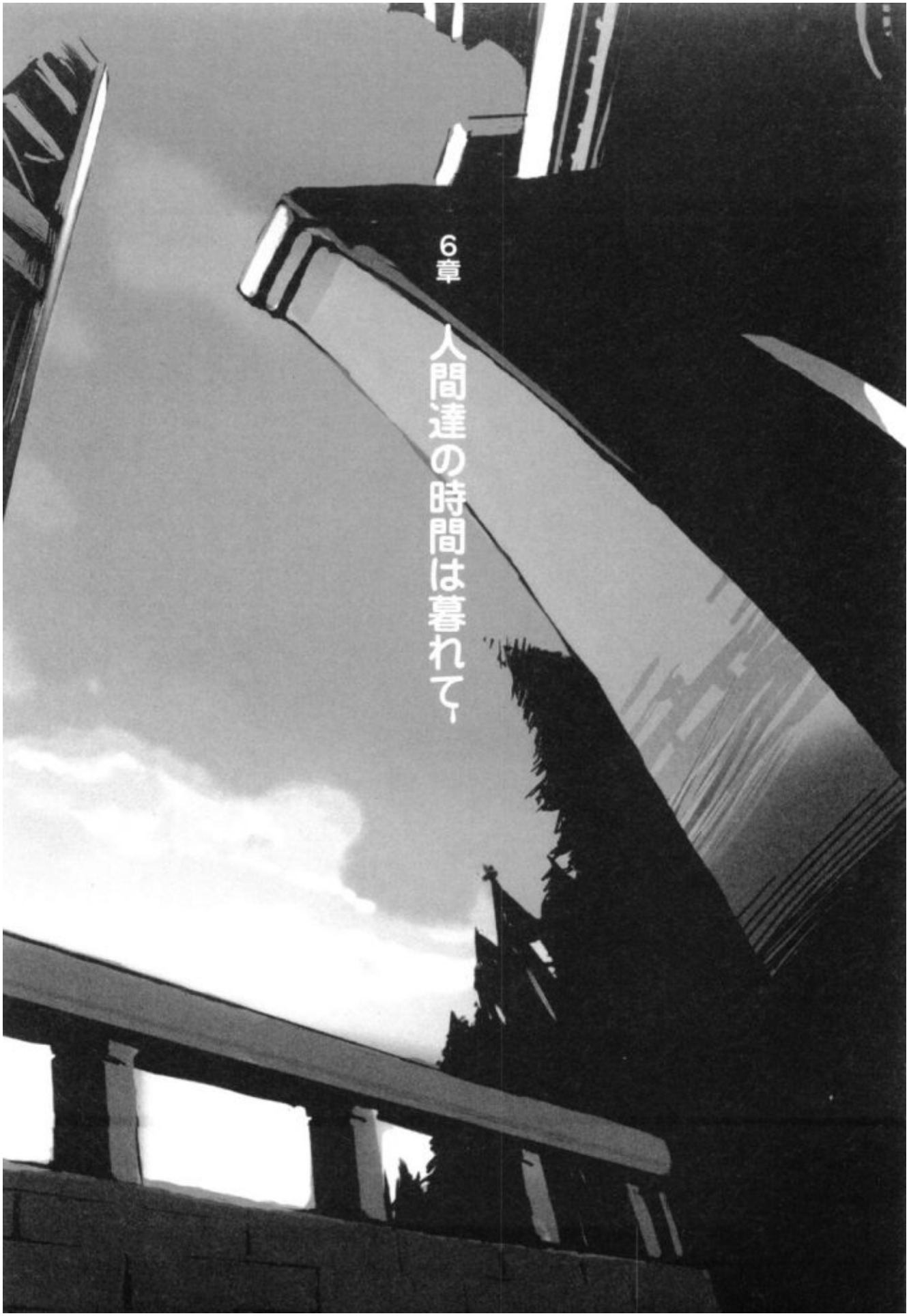
And so, they left the underground.

They set foot on a new world—toward something each needed to attain, not knowing what truly awaited them ahead.

†

“What was it that Melhilm demanded back from you? And what is it that we are here to find? It is the young vampire we left under your command, Watt Stalf.

“Valdred Ivanhoe, that watermelon’s name was…”



6章 人間達の時間は暮れて

Chapter 6: The Hour of Humanity Comes to an End, and...

Bats.

A flock of bats, cutting through the sky.

They flew in a perfectly organized formation, like a team of fighter planes.

‘He’ was headed for the biggest hospital on the island. Straight into a certain private room inside the ten-story building.

A second before they were flattened against the windows, the bats disintegrated like droplets of water, then turned into black fog as they entered through the window.

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in his actions. Rather, they betrayed a mix of anxiety and terrible anger.

The fog took material form inside the hospital room, becoming a teenaged boy. His handsome features were still somewhat childlike, but his expression was gravely set.

Although it was evening on a cloudy day, he had still flown outside before sundown. There were burn marks all over his body, but they healed in the blink of an eye.

There was a ‘No Visitors’ sign hanging on the door, but someone was already inside.

The girl in the room very closely resembled the boy. She was wearing a ragged black dress, and her face was so pale that she looked as though she could collapse at any moment.

“...Ferret.”

“Honored Brother...”

Ferret looked slightly relieved at the arrival of her older brother. Relic von Waldstein gently put an arm around his sister’s shoulder.

It was only then that he realized that Ferret was trembling. Was it because she had lost so much blood, or because she was so emotionally rattled?

Wrapping his arms around his trembling sister, Relic turned to the bed at the center of the room.

Medical devices and intravenous packs of all kinds were surrounding the bed. Every needle from the IV drips was connected to the arms and neck of its occupant.

A breathing tube was fixed to his face to keep his trachea clear, but his face was in much better shape than the rest of his body. Relic could still recognize the face of his friend.

“...How is he?”

Michael’s injuries were clearly severe. Yet even if his diagnosis was nothing but hopeless, Relic wanted to know the truth.

There was a moment of silence. Ferret hung her head, and began to recount what the doctors said earlier.

“…His life is not in danger. However… his spine was damaged in several places… and his right hand… may never regain function…”

Although there were gaps in her description, Ferret enunciated clearly with deliberate force. But Relic could feel her trembling worsen as she spoke of Michael’s right hand.

“…This isn’t your fault, Ferret.”

“But it *is*, Honored Brother! If… if only I were stronger…”

“There’s no point in discussing hypotheticals. Ferret, whether you’re weak or strong doesn’t change the fact that someone poured out all this hatred at Michael.”

“…”

Relic gently stepped away from his silent sister and approached the bedside.

“Michael…”

For some time, Relic’s gaze remained with his grievously injured childhood friend. Then, something caught his eye.

“…?”

Stuck next to one of the needles poking into his carotid artery was a rather large bandage. It was clearly of a different handiwork than the rest of his patched-up wounds, and there were two little red dots staining the gauze.

It was a familiar mark to Relic.

‘It must have been a needle.’ Relic tried to tell himself, but his sense of logic rejected the notion. Although it might have been most tactful to pretend that he never saw it, Relic was neither so foolish nor so sly that he would feign ignorance.

The mark on his childhood friend’s neck must have been left by a vampire. It was simple enough to deduce who might have been behind it.

“Ferret… did you…?”

Relic did not try to meet her gaze. He held back his emotions from tinting his words.

“I… will make no excuses.” Ferret said, still hanging her head. Her hands curled tightly into fists. “I… I am weak and powerless. Michael faced down that man on my behalf, yet I could do nothing for him.”

Although her tone was little different from usual, Relic could sense the emotions that filled her words. Ferret was doing her best to remain stoic, but the effort only served to tighten her chest. Her vision grew blurry with tears.

“The werewolves who carried Michael here told me that his life might be in danger. And at that moment, I… I…”

Her voice shook.

Because Relic's eyes were still on the mark on Michael's neck, Ferret did not force herself to look at her brother, either.

Relic wanted to be beside his sister. But knowing that Ferret wouldn't want such a thing, he remained where he was, allowing only his attention to be turned to her.

"I… before he was taken in for treatment… I… I sunk my fangs into Michael's neck…"

Ferret was forcibly squeezing out her voice.

Although she appeared to be quite calm, her words were full of resentment. Resentment at herself, for having been so weak.

With that, Ferret tried to end the conversation. But Relic spoke up before the room was swallowed by silence.

"It's all right, Ferret. I don't think he's been turned. Although I'm not sure if it's a blessing or a curse that you don't have the power to turn humans…"

Although Relic intended to bring Ferret some comfort with the statement, Ferret's heart only grew heavier. The weight of her guilt had not been alleviated.

She had torn into Michael's neck, drinking his blood.

The memory of that sensation worsened her trembling, now clearly visible.

"Why in the world… did I do such a thing…?!"

Her pent-up emotions spilled out at once with no end in sight. Her screams were filled to the brim, and tears of anguish fell from her eyes.

"I was scared… when I thought that Michael might die… I was so scared… I was so scared that I wanted to die! And before I knew it… I was already biting down… But I only made things worse! I left him with even more wounds! And if… if Michael dies because I drank his blood… What if he dies?! I… I…"

It was only then that Relic finally turned toward Ferret. He held her even more tightly than before, whispering to console her.

"Don't say stuff like that, okay? Ferret, Michael's not going to die. Remember what I just said about hypotheticals?"

But it was almost starting to sound like his words were directed at himself.

Embracing his sister, who had never looked so frail in her entire life, Relic lost himself in thought.

"It'll be all right, Ferret. He'll be okay."

"Relic… Relic…! I…!"

Ferret buried her face into Relic’s chest, choking back tears.

And she soon burst into sobs, her emotions overflowing all at once.

Relic knew that his sister would not want him to see her cry. He did not want to see, either.

So he stood there silently, only listening to the sound of her sobs.

On the inside, he allowed his heart nurture a certain emotion:

Soundless hatred for the Eater who had driven his sister to tears.



Once Ferret had regained some semblance of calm, Relic discussed what was going to happen next.

“I contacted Hilda, so she’ll be here soon.”

“...”

Hilda.

She was Relic’s girlfriend and Michael’s younger sister. As soon as Relic mentioned her name, Ferret headed for the door.

“Ferret.”

“How could I face her, Honored Brother?”

“It’s okay, Ferret. You know she won’t blame you.”

“That is precisely what pains me. Yes, I understand that I am running away… but please, Honored Brother. Please… give me some time.”

Relic did not try to stop his sister. Ferret took hold of the doorknob, and without turning back, addressed her brother.

“…Until today, I had never seriously considered drinking the blood of a human. I believe… today was the first time I felt such an impulse.”

“...?”

“But… how strange. Even though I feel for that Eater the very opposite of what I feel for Michael… I cannot help but want to drink that cursed man’s blood. I would leave not a single drop, and vomit it all into the ocean.”

Logically speaking, this was the point where he should try to dissuade Ferret, Relic thought. But he did not say anything of the sort.

He did not tell her to give up on revenge. He knew that to say such a thing would be to drive her further into a corner.

As Ferret came clean about her desire for vengeance, Relic could only answer,

“...Me too, Ferret.”

†

The werewolves, having returned to human form, were waiting outside Michael’s room.

Although it was normally against regulations for such a large group to camp out in front of a room marked ‘No Visitors’, hospital administrators knew about vampires and understood their situation. So they turned a blind eye to a certain degree of rule-bending.

Ferret greeted them with a nod, and quietly left down the hallway.

Relic watched his sister depart, and turned to the blue-haired werewolf in the hall.

“Um…”

“We know. We’ll watch over her.”

“…Thank you.”

“Heh. That’s our *job*, you know. We’re more than happy to help.”

The blue-haired werewolf gave a toothy grin. He then followed after Ferret alongside several other werewolves.

Relic sent them off gratefully. Suddenly, a little boy from one of the werewolf families approached him.

“Relic? Is Michael gonna be okay? He’s not gonna die, is he?”

Relic smiled kindly and gave the boy a pat on the head.

“It’s okay. You know how Ferret hits Michael all the time, but he always gets right back up? I’m sure he’s going to be fine this time, too.”

Even now, several werewolves were anxiously peeking through the door at Michael.

Michael seemed to be a very popular person among non-humans. His earnest sincerity, coupled with his genuine nature and the way he treated them no differently from others, had enraptured them—and even taken hold of Ferret’s heart.

Relic stepped back into the room and shut the door behind him. It was just him and Michael.

At that moment, the supposedly unconscious Michael suddenly spoke up.

“Relic… you lucky bastard… can’t believe… you got to hug Ferret…”

“You’re awake! Thank goodness. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Heh… heh… of all the luck… I was supposed to take her on a date tonight…”

Although Michael was as cheerful as ever, his voice made it quite clear that he was exhausted.

“…Y’know… Ferret gave me a kiss… right on the neck… I’ve never been so happy… in my entire life…”

“Michael… that’s—”

“A kiss. Yeah… That was a kiss.”

Michael cut him off. He probably had some inkling of what had happened to him earlier.

“That’s why… I’m so full of energy… y’know? I’m… all pumped up…”

He was wearing a look of supreme satisfaction, as though he would have had no qualms about forgiving Ferret if he had been turned by her bite.

But Relic also knew that Michael would never use the incident to take advantage of Ferret in any way. Michael was neither strong nor weak enough for such a thing. He was nothing but innocent.

“I promise… I didn’t see a thing… I didn’t hear Ferret crying… really… I’m serious…”

“I know. Get some rest, Michael.” Relic said, trying to be considerate. But Michael looked more worried than anything, refusing to go to sleep without finishing the conversation.

“Relic… keep an eye out on Ferret… Y’know…? She’s such a nice person… so if she hates someone… or kills someone… because of me… she’ll only end up hurting herself…”

“I know. I won’t let my sister become a murderer. It’s going to be okay, Michael. You should get some sleep. Rest.”

Once he was certain that Michael had nothing more to say, Relic approached the window and watched the sun finally disappear over the horizon. The sky was already quite dark, but his skin ached as he bathed in the final vestiges of light.

But he ignored the pain as he thought about what he should do next.

‘That’s right. Ferret’s boiling over with rage right now. But I’m feeling the same way as her.

‘Whoever that bastard is… the bastard who made Ferret cry and hurt Michael so badly…

‘I will never forgive him. I swear.’

The windowsill where his hands rested was slowly being obscured by dark fog. The shadow Relic cast in the hospital room began to writhe, slowly taking on the form of a flock of bats. The presence of wolves was being cast against the walls of the room.

And just as Relic’s power consumed the entire room, Michael slowly addressed him, despite having his eyes closed and having no way of knowing that anyone was still in the room.

“Relic… you… too…”

There was a dumbfounded smile on his face. Relic found his anger subsiding at the sight, his powers rapidly being pacified.

With an astonished sigh, Relic grinned at his girlfriend’s brother and childhood friend.

“Michael… you’re an amazing guy. I gotta hand it to you.”

And so, Michael finally fell asleep.

Relieved by the sound of Michael’s steady breathing, Relic once more turned this thoughts to things to come.

‘If nothing else, I hope the Carnale Festival will turn out all right…’

But he was certain: so long as the mysterious Eater who attacked Ferret still existed, that peace he hoped for would never become a reality.

And there was one thing he had not yet realized: the island of Growerth was teetering on the verge of a commotion more massive than he could ever have dreamed of.

†

At the same time, the harbor.

The ferry made port once more that day, as though the disturbance from earlier had never even happened.

This was the final boat to come in before the opening ceremony of the Carnale Festival. The excited chatter of the passengers filled the harbor even before the ramp was lowered.

Lively tourists from abroad disembarked one after another, and the harbor was soon host to countless people of different races and ethnicities. But the stream of visitors soon slowed to a trickle, and two men stepped off the ferry at the very end.

“Maaaaaaan. Can’t believe we’re finally here.”

“For your information, Little Brother, there’s nothing as tedious as sailing with you.”

This duo was, strangely enough, at once polar opposites and mirror images. Their features, heights, and builds were identical, but the colors of their eyes, hair, and skin were different. One was caucasian, and the other was of East Asian descent.

From their conversation, the Asian man seemed to be the elder brother. But from a purely visual standpoint, it was impossible to tell which one was older.

“All right! Let’s go find Mr. Gerhardt.”

“The mayor comes first.”

There was a tense moment of silence.

“Let’s start off tracking down those two Eaters!”

“What are you, an idiot? Finding Zygmunt comes first.”

Another moment of silence.

“Boxing: the sport of men. Am I right?”

“That would be *sumo*.”

“...Dinner.”

“A shower.”

“Cats.”

“Dogs.”

†

“For having been in a fight, you look like you got off pretty easy. So why the hell’d the two of you get into a scuffle on the ramp, anyway?”

One of the harbor officials was holding the two men in custody in the harbor office, keeping them for questioning.

“It was nothing more than a simple disagreement.”

“It’s a hobby of ours. And you don’t see any injuries on me ‘cause they’re already healed.”

The official questioning the men was having a hard time dealing with their particular brand of eccentricity.

“Names?”

“Yellow Bridgestone!”

“My name is Ishibashi Aiji.”

Any speakers of English and Japanese would instantly know that the names were fake. But the official only spoke German. He noted down the men’s names without a second thought.

“Passports?”

“C’mon, now! We’re totally Germans, born and raised.”

“We were abandoned at a young age and forced to fend for ourselves, so I’m afraid we have no official records.”

At that point, it was quite clear that the men were lying. But the official decided to save the detailed investigation for later and instead continued his questioning.

“Occupation?”

“Gunman!”

“A ninja. Although, for your information, I don’t live in hiding.”

The official finally put down his pen and put two objects onto the desk—the objects that had been found in the men’s belongings.

One was a plastic handgun. The other was a bamboo sword. They were both quite obviously children’s toys.

“Would those occupations by any chance involve making money with these toys?”

“It’s not a toy. My gun shoots silver bullets, you know?”

“This sword is called a *shinai*. And for your information, we have no income.”

The official decided that the black-haired man was the more reasonable of the two, and turned to him.

“I see. So how d’you feed yourselves?”

But this time, the two men answered in unison.

“We moonlight as—”

“Hah! Can’t believe we finally agreed on something, Big Brother. Like one big happy family.”

“But it’s hard to believe that all we had to do was show the man a couple of bats in order to be released. Sir Gerhardt and Watt seem to be quite influential in these parts.”

“Tch. If we were gonna prove we’re vampires, I could’ve just shown the guy my sharpshooting skills.”

“You’d have destroyed the building that way.”

Because they had spent too much time being questioned in the office, the brothers had no choice but to go to the opening ceremony in order to meet with both the mayor and the viscount.

Yellow and Indigo climbed the hill together, surrounded by countless festival-goers.

“So who else is comin’ besides us?”

“Hm… Miss Dorothy should be here already. And I believe Romans the Dark Grey elected to stay behind this time; he claims to dislike crowds.”

“Yeah, he’d send everyone running with that mug of his. And who else?”

“Everyone will probably make their own decisions. We’ve contacted the officers who weren’t present—Black, Mirror, Gold, Silver, Pearl, and Orange. But most answered that they would only come if they had the time. Although Garde the Black seemed to be intent on beating down Caldimir before coming to the island.” The elder brother replied stoically. Yellow shook his head.

“So teamwork’s still a foreign concept to everybody… Anyway, you said Miss Dorothy’s already here?”

“Yeah. It’s almost sundown, so she should be just about… Ah. Now.”

Ishibashi looked up at the sky over the castle and smiled like a man who had just won the lottery.

†

At that very moment, most of those who had been looking up at the sky over the hill realized that something was wrong.

“Oh? Was Miss Dorothy supposed to join us today?” Theresia wondered as she headed for her next destination.

“…Miss Dorothy, huh. But I don’t have time for her… I have to find that vampire girl… No. Finding Theresia comes first…”

After a brief moment of rest, Rudi got up from his shelter in the rocks.

“…Hm? I hadn’t heard a thing about Dorothy coming to the island today. What is Caldimir up to?” The black bats that had been flying over the castle mumbled, watching the sky around him.

†

And as for the master of that very castle:

[My word! So many visitors to entertain today. Ah, it seems there is only an hour to go before the opening ceremony begins…]

As the viscount wondered where he should station himself for the best view of the ceremony, one of the maids spoke up nervously.

“Um… Master?”

[Yes? Might you have found a most perfect vantage point for tonight’s festivities?]

“No, sir. There was something very important we had to report to you, but we could not interrupt your meetings with your guests…”

[And what might that be?] The viscount asked firmly, detecting the gravity with which the maid spoke.

“We were contacted by Grandmother Job not very long ago. It was at the harbor, sir, this afternoon—”

“Master Gerhardt! The window! Outside!”

The sudden exclamation cut off the maid’s report. Stumbling into the room with this cry was a Japanese man wearing a suit—a vampire stage magician affectionately known as ‘Mage’.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Cried the maid who had been reporting to the viscount, but everyone else in the room, including the viscount, took one glance out the window and realized that something was wrong.

“…Is this… snow?”

Clumps of white were falling from the sky in massive quantities.

“But… it’s not even winter!”

Northern Germany was relatively warm even in winter because it was in an oceanic climate zone. This also meant that summers were quite cool and prone to storms, but in spite of it all, Growerth had never once received snowfall in the summertime. At least, that was what logic dictated.

But at that moment, logic was dead. Perhaps it would have been more realistic for snow to be falling now, instead of what was actually happening over the castle.

To be specific, the clumps of white falling from the sky were not snowflakes.

The moment each clump neared the ground, it rose into the air like a bird riding the winds, repeatedly ascending and descending as though it had a mind of its own.

And those in the parlor with particularly good eyesight finally managed to capture the identity of the masses of white.

“Those are… white bats…?” Someone muttered. At that very moment, one of the bats glanced over at the viscount inside the room.

Then, the millions of white bats flying outside rushed in through the window, as though in an attempt to fill the castle.

“Master!” The maids cried, attempting to protect the viscount, but the viscount scrawled in extremely large letters:

[There is no need for panic!]

“?!”

[This visitor is no stranger, I assure you.]

The bats congregated at unthinkable speeds, combining together at a single point. And for some reason, ever since the bats first entered the room, the parlor seemed to feel colder.

Finally, the gusts in the wake of the bats settled. The occupants of the parlor turned to the point at which they had been gathering.

Standing there was not the flock of bats from earlier, but a woman.

She had white skin, white hair, and white eyes, and wore a white dress. The woman, who looked rather like the personification of snow, smiled nostalgically as she caught sight of the viscount.

“It’s been much too long, Viscount Gerhardt.”

[Indeed it has, my dear Dorothy.]

It was clear that they two of them were at least acquainted with one another, but the maids and the werewolves did not let their guard down for even a moment. Mage, who had alone been pacing back and forth, nervously spoke up.

“Um… Master Gerhardt? This would be…?”

[Ah, yes. This is Dorothy, a fellow member of the Organization I discussed earlier. It has indeed been a very long time. What brings you all the way to Growerth, Dorothy? It would be nothing short of delightful to hear that you came to visit for my sake, although I am unsure as to whether that is the case today.]

The second part of his words was directed at Dorothy. She smiled pleasantly.

“I’m afraid not, Gerhardt. I’ve come today to protect your son Relic.”

[Oh?]

“Melhilm and Caldimir are both after him, Gerhardt! And seeing as he is to one day become my son, I thought that I should try and act as a mother to him while I had the chance.”

Everyone but Dorothy and the viscount froze.

A moment later, all eyes were on the viscount as though demanding an explanation.

The pool of blood did not hesitate to give them an answer.

[Is there something the matter, my friends? Dorothy is my most lovely fiancée.]

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

“…”

In utter silence, Doctor watched the footage recorded through the harbor’s security cameras.

He had installed the cameras in many places around the island, particularly in locations where vampires tended to gather. He had the footage directed to his laboratory, where he could observe them from the comfort of his chair.

Normally, the harbor camera went completely neglected.

But when he heard the rumors about the commotion that took place there, Doctor decided to take a look at it once Val had left the lab.

<Doctor? What's wrong? That's an awfully scary face you're making.>

"Hm? Ah, Professor. Perfect timing."

Doctor turned to Professor, wearing an unnecessarily bright smile.

<What is it?>

"No, it's only… I'd just remembered that it's been quite a long time since we began working together."

<Doctor? It's not like you to talk about the past like this…>

"Idle thoughts, Professor, nothing more… But to be perfectly honest, I really must thank you for everything. How you brought such healing to my lonesome heart…"

Though Professor was bemused by Doctor's sudden show of sentimentality, she twisted her body round and round in embarrassment.

<Aww, not at all, Doctor! *You're* the one who saved me when I was just an amnesiac soul who couldn't do anything but latch on to this skeleton! I'd do anything for you!>

"Would you, now? Then… I have a request."

<Yes? What is it?>

Professor folded back her arms in a motion of readiness. Doctor leaned in close to her, a smile fixed on his face.

"Then… I want you to listen, okay? Please, listen to my name. I can't ask anyone but you…"

<Huh?>

Professor's soul was struck by an ominous feeling.

She had lived with Doctor all this time, but never before had he spoken this way—in a way that was a perfect match for his childlike appearance.

As Professor stood in confusion, Doctor put a hand on the lid of her coffin.

And in a quiet voice, so low that only she could hear, he whispered to her his true name.

"Theodosius… My real name is Theodosius M. Waldstein."

And before Professor could even react, he quickly flipped open the lid of the coffin.

Her arms, caterpillar tracks, and her voice generator all ceased to function. Professor could no longer move.

But Doctor—Theodosius M. Waldstein—smiled sadly at the 'soul' that surely existed before him.



“I’m sorry. Just get some rest here, so you won’t get involved. I didn’t think it would happen so soon, but… there’s something I have to do.”

Each and every word uttered by that beautiful face was filled with pathos, like the lines of a hero straight out of a tragedy.

“Thank you. You… brought me salvation.”

With that, Doctor recalled the images he saw on the monitor earlier.

Theresia—one of the two children he met many years ago.

And the man in the suit of armor, who stepped out of the crate next to her. In all likelihood, her other half.

Recalling the two faces, Theo whispered to himself:

“But you know, I’m not worthy of salvation. Not now, not ever.”

†

Pasts and presents of all kinds collided together on the island.

Enlivened by the lights and the crowds, the festival embraced the collision—

And the moment it finally began, the hour of humanity came to an end.

The darkness of Night began to stir, led by the lights of the festival.

Little by little,

Without so much as a sound…


蛇足章
墓守は音もなく忍びより

Extra Chapter: The Gravekeeper Approaches in Silence, and...

There was a moment of calm, followed by the sound of the parlor at Waldstein Castle turning upside-down.

At that very moment, in the place where the Organization's vampires had gathered for their meeting, a man was laughing to himself.

"Hahaha... Mwahahahahahahaha! I've fooled them! I've fooled them all!"

The vampire was rolling on the floor of the great empty hall, laughing like a hyena.

"Oh, that feels great! Stupendous! I've never felt so good in my entire life! Hah! How you bastards sneered at me all these years... But enjoy it while you can! Yes! We vampires are all about power. But guess what? I've got more than that. I've also got *wisdom*!"

Caldimir reveled in his victory as he lay in a fetal position on the floor. He had been beaten senseless by the other vampires earlier and left unconscious, but as soon as he awoke, he knew that he had managed to hide the truth from his fellow officers.

The true reason for dispatching Zygmunt to Growerth.

"Those *fools*! I bet they're scrambling to protect Relic right about now! But once Rudi and Theresia get wind of the fact that he's one of the Waldsteins, they'll take care of him without me having to get my hands dirty! And in the meantime, *I* get my hands on yet another product of Melhilm's research!"

Caldimir remembered the watermelon to whom he had given some of his own blood.

"And so! I will become greater than humans! Greater than vampires! I will become a god!"

"Who's becoming a god? Who?"

"Heh... Who do you *thin*-"

Caldimir was partway through his reply when he finally realized that he was not alone. He looked around, left and right, to find the owner of the voice.

But there was really nothing he had to look for.

A gender-ambiguous figure was crouching on one of the chairs, dressed in strange clothing.

The figure's face was wrapped up in layers upon layers of black bandages, their wide-open right eye being the only feature exposed to the world. The rest of their body was also wrapped up in bandages, making them look very much like a black mummy. The only exposed parts of their body was their shoulder-length hair, which stuck straight into the air, and the area around their neck and bellybutton.

This strange being spoke once more in a voice that did not sound particularly masculine or feminine.

“What’re you doing? Say, what’re you doing?”

“Grr… Garde the Black! Garde Ritzberg?!”

‘Wh-what?! I didn’t even contact Garde! So why is the Black Gravekeeper—’

“There was a conference. A conference! Why didn’t you call me? Well? Why didn’t you?”

“It can’t be… How did you find out about… Urgh… Agh…!”

Garde leapt into the air as Caldimir stuttered, landing atop the latter’s stomach.

Caldimir’s organs and ribs were badly injured by the blow. He wanted to roll around on the floor again, for a different reason from before, but Garde remained standing atop him, preventing even that.

“Ignoring me, are you? Ignoring me?”

“D-don’t…”

“I’m angry. I’m really really really really angry. I am. Yes! I am!”

A fist mercilessly drove itself into Caldimir’s face with astounding force.

“Argh…! But… you would side with Gerhardt! Unconditionally!”

“*Mister* Gerhardt. Right? *Mister* Gerhardt.” Garde spat coldly, pulling back their fist little by little. With that, the curtains rose on the one-man massacre in the conference hall.

“I should tell everyone what this idiot’s planning. I should.”

Garde glanced at Caldimir, now a pile of half-ground meat on the floor, and took out their cell phone.

They then realized that there was a problem.

“I don’t know! Hm? I don’t know their numbers! Their emails are on my computer back home! On my computer!”

Garde put their hand to their temples, wondering what they should do.

A moment later, Garde’s eye widened as they came to a simple conclusion.

“I’ll have to go. No other choice! I’ll have to go!”

-To be continued in Volume III-

Afterword

So, hello. This is Narita.

Due to circumstances, the afterword for my March release was only a page long, so they're giving me a whopping eight pages this time! Woohoo!

I'll be taking this opportunity to talk about the things I want to discuss, one by one.

About Vamp!

So, here I am with the first volume of Vamp! in a year and one month.

And I'd like to apologize. This is only part 1 of 2. This volume will likely be the Day Side, and the next volume the Night Side. So please keep reading.

-1-

The viscount was the main character in the previous volume, but this time, the story focuses on multiple characters, including a watermelon.

I also write stories with 'no main character' for my other series.

Sometimes, readers get angry and ask me, "I don't know which character I'm supposed to be projecting onto!". Uh, well… I'm sorry.

Please just project onto every character. Or project onto no one. Read on with this in mind.

Even before I made my debut, I'd wanted to write a story about outrageous characters going crazy. This volume of Vamp! is slowly going in that direction… I hope.

-2-

To be perfectly honest, I'd like to write a bunch of things like 'A vampire with the power to stop time!', 'Revival of the vampire emperor!', 'Attack of the space vampires', 'Vampire god vs. chainsaw', or 'demonic vampire goes to Tokyo'—things from the last generation of *shonen* manga. I want to inflate power levels like no tomorrow—protagonists and enemies alike—and end things off with a galactic vampire fighting tournament, only to finally be stopped by the editorial department.

That might be a bit of a stretch(although I would love to read it), I'd like to go for such flashy manga-style action in another series.

…At least, that's what I told my friend. Then came the following exchange.

Friend: “I don’t want to read something like that.”
Me: “Then buy my other series.”
Friend: “Aren’t all your books the same?”
Me: “Then just buy them and don’t read them! Problem solved.”
Friend: “But if I’m not going to read them, why would I—”
Me: “Buy them.”

It feels almost like I’m treading on a very fine line as an author, but I’ll continue to do my best to write.

-3-

Future plans

Next up will be Vamp! III or a short story anthology, but at the moment I’m prioritizing the second half of this particular story.

Afterwards, I plan to finish off the Etsusa Bridge series and Durarara!!, then focus on Baccano! and a new series. But these are just plans, so I have no idea how they’ll actually turn out…

-4-

About the editorial department

For the past several volumes, I’ve been working with two editors—editor-in-chief Suzuki-san, and Wada-san.

Wada-san, who’s joined me recently, is stubborn and skilled, and also works with Koda-san and Okayu-san.

Other editors call him the superman of the mercenary editors.

And for the first time, Wada-san gave me suggestions for book titles!

Wada: “This volume is the sequel to Vamp!, so why not call it ‘Vavamp!’?”
Me: “?!”
Wada: “And volume 3 will be ‘Vavavamp!’.”
Me: “That… sounds good…”
Wada: “Right?”

And several days later,

Wada: “As I said the other day, we’ll be adding Roman numerals to the title for Vamp! II.”
Me “…?!”

-5-

I don't really understand what happened over those few days, but it's clear to me that Wada-san is a man of many mysteries.

Words of thanks

I missed the deadline again with this book and caused a lot of trouble. Editor-in-chief Suzuki-san and Wada-san from the editorial department, the schedule manager Jasmine-san, the publishing department, and everyone from Media Works—I'm terribly sorry, and thank you so much!

And thank you to my family, friends, acquaintances, and everyone living in the city of S.

Thank you to Enami Katsumi-san, who in the flood of new characters designed so many of them and drew so many backgrounds in the midst of his busy work.

And thank you to my readers, for taking up this sequel that took me a year to release!

Postscript

-6-

I'm currently serializing Hariyama-san, Center of the World on an irregular schedule over at Dengeki hp. Please have a read! Each chapter is a short story of a different genre, so don't worry about missing out a few updates.

Now that I think about it, they gave me eight pages, but still the same word count limit. Wait, hold up. Is

-7-

it even less than usual?!

Wh-what's going on?

Even *Sekai Fushigi Hakken*[1] got revamped. Just what in the world—

In any case, I hope we'll meet again in the next book. Then

—Wait, the word count really *is* shorter!

---

[1] A television show in Japan that is broadcast on TBS every Saturday. It is a mix of quiz and a talk show that talks about the world.

What the heck is going on I demand to know

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